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THRILLING ADVENTURES



MARCH, 1932

THRILLING

ADVENTURES

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Featuring:

THE SACRED SCIMITAR

*A Complete
Book-Length Novel*

By JACK d'ARCY

AZTEC GOLD

By ARTHUR J. BURKS

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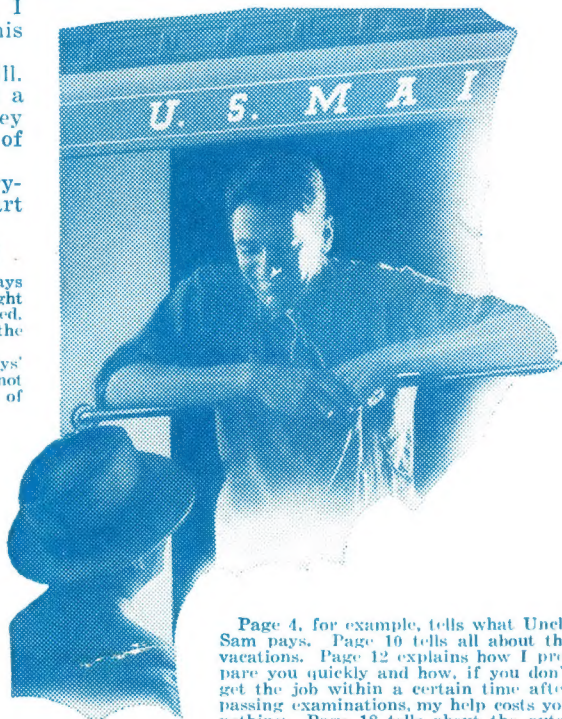
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J. S. WILLIAMS, Editor

March, 1932

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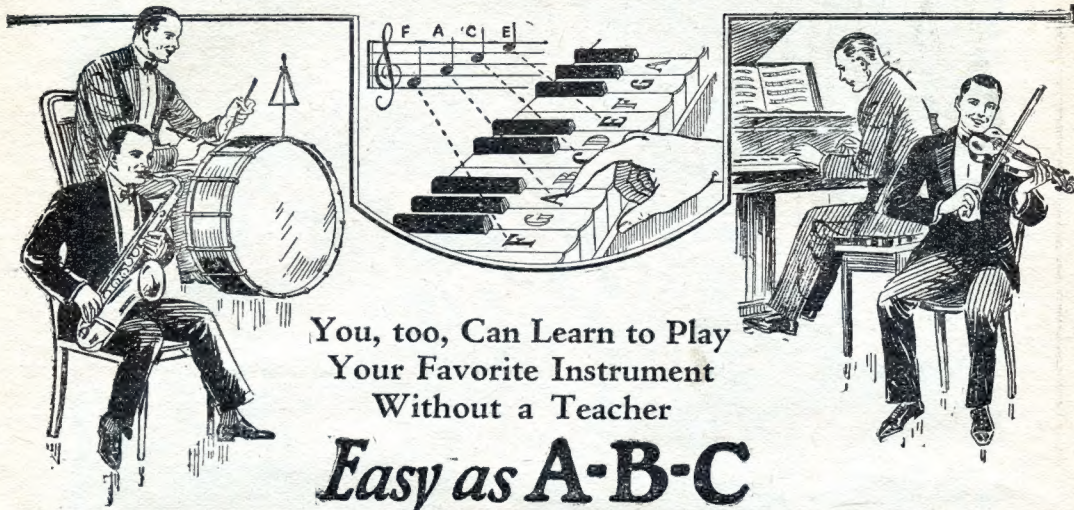
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THE SACRED



*Maddened by the Brutal Murder of His Father,
Young Weston Meets Stirring Adventures on
the Quest for Revenge in India*

By JACK D'ARCY

Author of "Fall Out the Gentlemen," "The Crucible," etc.

CHAPTER I

Death Strikes Hard

THE JUNGLE lay quiet and still beneath the morning sun. With the coming of the red dawn the monkeys had ceased their chattering, the killers had retired to their lairs, dragging their gory prey behind them. Even the birds, who gloried in the coming of the day, seemed to chirp discouragedly, as though they, too, were

aware of the ominous tranquility that had cast its pall over Nature's great battleground—the jungle.

The red glow of the Indian sun beat down upon the roof of green which concealed invisible savage denizens of the wild. A few scattered beams filtered through the thick leaves, but for the most part, a damp shade covered the matted floor of the huge expanse which knew no human inhabitant.

An unfamiliar sound, along an al-

SCIMITAR

*A Complete
Book-Length
Novel*



most invisible trail, sent half a dozen small mammals scurrying for cover. A score of eyes peered from the tree tops, and a pendant python quickly swung himself to a higher limb, as the peculiar noise grew more distinct.

Three black heads suddenly appeared on the trail. Then a dozen more hove into sight. The slithering patter of bare feet increased as the whole safari came into view. Superb native bodies marched silently onward, their massive shoulders bent beneath the heavy loads that they carried.

At their head marched a single proud native whose burden consisted of two guns, one a high-pressure double-barrel, and the other a repeating rifle. By his side walked a gaunt grim figure, bronzed and hardened by many a year spent beneath the merciless tropical sun.

His stride was easy and athletic despite his forty odd years. His mouth was a straight line two inches above his chin, and notwithstanding the soberness of his bearing, a sense of triumph seemed to emanate from his very being.

Something in the carriage of his head, something of the shining light in his eyes, indicated that here was a man who had tasted the fruits of victory, who had drunk deep of the cup of life and found the heady beverage to his liking.

The safari marched onward through the jungle.

It stopped abruptly. Unlike the forests of the Occident which thin out gradually, giving way to gentle rolling plains, the dense green hell ended with a breath-taking suddenness.

The cavalcade emerged from the luxuriant growth and found them-

selves standing on a hard sun-baked plain. The sun was dropping slowly down upon the horizon, wearily, as though even the great god Apollo, himself, had tired of his arduous journey across the face of the heavens.

THE white man shaded his eyes with his hand and gazed across the monotonous plain. Less than three miles ahead, a half dozen white minarets gleamed in the fading light of the day. A tremendous dome rose proudly toward the sky, and a score of lesser buildings huddled against the towering castle in the distance. The white man turned to his gun bearer with a smile.

"Well, Singhi, we're home at last."

The black grinned at his master. "It is well, *sahib*," he said sonorously in his native tongue.

An hour later the little caravan marched through the huge iron gates which formed the entrance to the palace of the Rajah of Marapana. The white man dismissed his servants with a few words and turned again to his gun bearer.

"Singhi," he said, "convey my respects to the Rajah and tell him I shall pay my visit to him in an hour. I've got to dress."

He walked away and entered one of the lesser buildings that stood a few hundred yards from the castle proper. No sooner had he passed into the house, than a boisterous voice hailed him.

"Weston! Thank God, you're back. What luck? Come on in and have a stinger and tell me about it."

Weston found himself pumping the hand of a tall, thin white man, who beamed on him cordially.

"The greatest luck in the world, Somers," he replied. "I've found it. But let's have that drink first, I'm dying of thirst."

Somers led the way into a large

chamber, furnished with a narrow cot, a desk and a sideboard that was well supplied with vintage beverages. He poured out two stiff drinks, set them on the table, then seated himself opposite the man who had just come from the jungle.

"Well," he said again. "What have you discovered?"

Weston grinned happily. "Enough to make his Nibs, the Rajah, regret ever having granted us this concession," he said. "It was just as we figured. I've found it. It'll take us the better part of a year to get the stuff out. I haven't examined it yet. I wanted to return and consult you. There are many dangers out there to be overcome."

Somers nodded. "I expected that," he said. "But when playing for high stakes, one must take some risks."

"Of course. But listen, before we go out again, I want my son to join us. I've been promising him for years that I'd let him come out. I think that it's only fitting to let him in on the finish of this great adventure."

"Sure," said Somers. "I'd like to meet him. The more the merrier. We can use another white man, anyway."

"Good," said Weston. "Will you send a messenger at once to Rangoon to send a cable to Larry? Tell him to sail at once. In the meantime, I'll dress. Then I'll see the Rajah. I'll give you all the detail. The maps I've made are in my knapsack, you can get them from Singhi, if you get too impatient."

"Right. I'll get a boy off for Rangoon right away. Then I'll wait till you finish with his Nibs."

SOMERS left the room, filled with excitement. Hastily he scribbled a message to young Larry Weston, then returned to his room. He sat down with his pipe and waited im-

patiently for Weston's return, to hear the information regarding the fortune for which they had searched so long together, and which was now almost within their grasp.

After two hours of this Somers decided that he could wait no longer to assuage his curiosity. He sent for Singhi and demanded that Weston's knapsack be brought to him. When he received it, he opened it eagerly and searched with anxious fingers for the maps of which his partner had spoken.

HE replaced the knapsack on the table with a disappointed air.

"Funny," he muttered to himself. "I could have sworn he said in his knapsack. But maybe he took 'em in to show his Nibs."

He waited a short while longer, then decisively he rose to his feet and strode down the corridor to Weston's room. He knocked twice on the door, but received no answer. Then, gently, he turned the knob and walked in. The sun had long since set and the Indian night had darkened the blazing day. Somers took a flashlight from his pocket and pressed its button with his thumb.

Slowly, he turned the yellow beam of illumination around the room. Then suddenly, his hand stopped in the centre of the arc it had described. A short gasp escaped his lips, and the blood ran chill in his veins. He took a short step forward. He fell to one knee and a shout came from his lips.

"Singhi! Boy! Here quickly! Bring a light!"

In response to his shout a couple of boys ran swiftly down the hall. Two lamps entered the room simultaneously. And by their flickering light, Somers saw the horrible sight that he already had seen by the beam from his flashlight.

Pitched forward on the floor with glazed eyes, and a frightful grimace on his face, lay the body of Weston. The hilt of a Churka's knife protruded from his heart. His immaculate whites which he had just put on were crimson with his own blood.

The body stirred faintly as Somers bent over it.

"Weston," he shouted hoarsely. "Weston!"

The figure jerked convulsively and the white lips moved. Somers bent his ear down in time to hear three words.

"The sixth door——"

A ghastly rattle came from the wounded man's throat. His body stiffened weirdly, and the knife hilt quivered slightly in the dancing light of the room. Somers rose to his feet. He shouted orders to the boys in Hindustani, then left the room.

In his own apartment he poured himself three stiff drinks, donned his riding clothes, and swore harshly during both processes. A half hour later he was grimly riding into Rangoon to send another cablegram.

A few miles behind him, native laborers plied pick and shovel as they dug a grave for the gory thing which had once been Hugh Weston. The funeral ritual consisted of more speed than ceremony. A corpse must be interred by sun-up on the equator.

CHAPTER II

The Man With the Scarred Hand

AT HIS New York apartment, Larry Weston received two cablegrams in the space of an hour. The receipt of the first sent him into an ecstasy of excitement. He read it, and with a whoop of joy, dragged a pair of battered suitcases from his closet and commenced tossing his belongings into them haphazardly.

He emptied all the drawers, and flung their contents upon the table. Amongst the assortment of odds and ends that accumulate in a man's drawer, he discovered his old thirty-eight Colt revolver. He considered this find for a moment, and was idly wondering whether or not he would find any use for such a weapon in India, when the second cablegram was thrust under his door.

AND as he read it, the color left his young handsome face. His fingers grew taut as they held the white slip of paper. His eyes became hard, then, a second later, softened with moisture and a single tear ran down his cheek. Something constricted in his throat, and a horrible emptiness attacked the pit of his stomach.

Then, with a terrible, bitter expression on his face he turned to the table and picked up the thirty-eight. He ran an oiled rag around its barrel and cleaned it thoroughly. He placed it in the bottom of his suitcase.

Then he forsook his packing and turned to face himself in the mirror; and in a cracked emotional voice that he would hardly have recognized as his own, he cursed his father's murderer, his sire, his grand-sire, back, back to Adam himself.

Two days later, he was at sea. The news of his father's death had left him taciturn and unsocial. Thus it was that he kept to himself on the boat. With one exception, his fellow passengers seemed to respect his mood, and made few overtures to win his friendship. But one man he found particularly obnoxious.

The second day out he was standing by the rail surveying the rolling expanse of ocean, when a voice at his elbow brought him out of his reverie.

"Bound for Europe?"

He turned to see a tall dark man, with a pronounced Hindu cast to his features.

"Yes," he said brusquely and moved away.

But his questioner was not to be gotten rid of so easily.

"Have a cigarette?"

Larry nodded a refusal, and as his eyes noted the other's proffered cigarette case he saw that the hand that held it was marked with a jagged white scar that ran from the tip of the middle finger to the wrist. The other noticed Larry's gaze.

"About that scar," he began conversationally. "There's a long and interesting story attached to that."

"Undoubtedly," said Larry rudely, then turned on his heel and commenced pacing the deck.

He cared little what the other thought of his conduct. He was in no mood to embark upon one of those dull casual friendships which are so often made at sea.

But as the days passed he was compelled to take notice of this man who had intruded upon his privacy. At whatever hotel he stayed during his long journey, he was sure to find the man with the scarred hand sitting inevitably in the lobby.

On the train to Marseilles, where he was to catch the boat for Calcutta, he saw him enter the adjoining compartment. And when at last he discovered that his neighbor in the next cabin on the ship was none other than this persistent Hindu, he began to wonder.

TRUE, the man now made no attempt to engage Larry in further conversation, but the American youth knew that the other's eyes always seemed to be upon him. It began to make him uncomfortable. Still, after all, it may have been

nothing more than coincidence. Perhaps, the Hindu was bound for India, too. And there was nothing particularly remarkable as his taking a similar route to Larry.

Larry attempted to forget it, and attributed it to the unstrung condition of his nerves since he had heard of the tragedy which had befallen his father.

He had cabled Somers, and upon arriving at his hotel in Rangoon, a few days later, he found a message from his father's partner, informing him that he would pick him up at noon the following day and escort him to the domain of the Rajah.

Impatient though he was to be off to the scene of his father's death and to meet Somers, whom he had often heard of but never seen, Larry welcomed the day of idleness which would enable him to see the ancient city of the East.

Being young and adventurous and realizing that he was well able to take care of himself, Larry spurned the services of the guides who swarmed about the hotel, and walked through the lobby with the intention of doing his own sightseeing.

AS he left the broad verandah, where a half dozen Englishmen were observing their sacred rite of afternoon tea, his keen eyes discerned a familiar figure, seated behind a potted palm, in the lobby.

An expression of annoyance came over his face as he recognized the man who had apparently dogged his footsteps ever since he had left New York. However, he made no sign of recognition, and increasing his pace he left the hotel and went forth into the crowded, motley city.

So interested was he in the bizarre appearance of the town that he failed to notice the passage of time. He visited the bazaars, where the merchants chanted their wares with a rich singsong intonation.

He left the beaten tourist paths and rubbed shoulders with the surging crowd of natives that thronged the town. So entranced was he with the exotic city, that he strayed unconsciously into a section of the town that rarely beheld Europeans.

After a while he began to notice the glances that the natives cast at him, and, at this point, he decided to return to his hotel.

He turned and commenced to retrace his steps, though he was by no means certain of his way. Then, as he paused to take his bearings, someone bumped into him. He glanced down to see a young Indian girl. Her face was veiled, but in the depths of the pair of luminous eyes that gazed up at him, he saw a mist of tears.

He stepped aside, and apologized. The girl made no reply, but he could have sworn that he saw her shoulders shake with a sob as she hurried down the street.

It was then that his curiosity and love of adventure overcame his discretion. Without pausing to consider what he was doing, he turned and followed the girl through the narrow, fetid streets.

For some few hundred yards he kept close to her trail, then his heart felt a keen disappointment when she swerved suddenly and disappeared into a dilapidated old stone house.

He walked slowly, and gazed into the doorway where he had observed the girl enter. There was no door. An old piece of burlap hanging over the entrance served as the portal.

HE smiled at himself for being such a romantic fool as to follow a native girl for no other reason save that he had seen a tear in her eye, and prepared, once more, to return to his hotel, when he heard a

weird cry ring out from the window over his head.

He glanced up swiftly, to see a face at the window. Then, the face disappeared. For a single second, he stood there irresolutely, then the cry was repeated. It was a ghastly shriek, shrill and penetrating, and was followed immediately by the low sound of a woman sobbing.

Larry hesitated no longer. Throwing discretion to the four winds, he flung the burlap aside with his hand and raced into the building.

He felt his heart beating violently as he stood within a dark, dank, and evil smelling hole. The walls were moist and heavy with slime. He heard the soft scurry of some loathsome vermin in the darkness.

Tense, and a little breathless, Larry stood for a moment, uncertainly at the foot of a rickety staircase which led to the upper floors. Then once more that long drawn shuddering scream rammed itself into his ears. There was a world of appeal and anguish in its sobbing shrillness.

WITHOUT another moment's hesitation, Larry Weston bounded up the stairs. The scream seemed to have come from a room that faced the landing above. With a thud, Larry flung his broad shoulders at the flimsy panel of the wooden door. There was a splintering crash, and the fragile door gave way beneath the force of his blow.

For a moment, he stood upon the threshold gasping for breath. He beheld a broken lamp, reeking vilely of paraffin, which shed its fitful yellow light on a sordid scene. On a dingy bed in the center of the room a man was tossing about in an agony of fever. At the side of the bed, crouched in an attitude of numb, hopeless despair was the girl that Larry had followed.

The scene impinged itself sharply on his mind. The girl's oval face was dark, and the swarthy features of the man on the bed branded him as a high caste native. Being unable to speak anyone of the hundred odd native dialects, Larry decided to gamble in English, though he believed there was small chance of his being understood.

"Do you need help?" he said to the girl.

The girl stared at him curiously, and with the instinctive modesty of the Moslem woman held her veil carefully before her face. Her eyes gleamed over the top of the silken fabric. Then, to his utter amazement and delight, she answered him in broken but quite understandable English.

"It's my father, sahib. He's dying."

Larry hesitated for a second, then stepped forward toward the bed. He started back as the man tossed frantically, then gave vent to one of the horrible shrieks that Larry had heard down in the street.

Evidently the man was in the grip of some terrible Oriental disease. He spoke soothingly to the girl who was rocking back and forth in utter misery.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "Who are you? Do you live in this hovel?"

The girl gasped out her story in broken sentences.

"It is my father, sahib. We have had to flee our enemies. There is no one more high caste in India, than we are. But our enemies are many, and my father has been driven from his domain."

"What is your name?"

The girl hesitated. "That I can not tell," she said proudly. It is his order and I must obey."

"Come," said Larry. "There must be hospitals in Rangoon. You must send him there at once. You—"

HE broke off as the girl gave a little gasp of dismay. A slither of bare feet was heard in the corridor without. Larry glanced quickly toward the door. An evil faced Hindu stood staring at him and the glint in his eyes boded no good to the American who had dared to outrage the sanctity of his home. He jabbered in excited Hindustani to the girl. Larry looked at her inquiringly.

"What does he say?"

"He wants to know who you are," she translated. "He says you have no right to break his door down. He says you must leave."

"Tell him," said Larry grimly, "that I'll leave when your father is taken to a hospital. Tell him to go out and get a native policeman."

The girl said something incomprehensible to the evil-faced one. For a moment he stood glaring undecidedly at Larry, then seeing from the look in the white man's eyes that he did not intend to give way, he turned abruptly on his bare heel and pattered down the corridor again.

Larry smiled grimly to himself and prayed that his bluff had worked. The girl still cowered, frightened, in the corner. Then, with a suddenness that was startling, the man on the bed raised himself to his elbow and began to talk in feverish delirious tones.

"Nirva, my daughter. Guard well the sacred scimitar. Let no profane hands touch it. Beware of the red Rajah, for his hands are red with blood."

The girl leaned over her father and attempted to cool his fevered brow with her soft brown hands. Again the man on the bed gave vent to a confused babble, half English and half his native tongue. Larry listened intently and tried to pick out the words which would give him a clue to these weird happenings.

He turned to the girl and said excitedly:

"Of what does your father speak? Where is this scimitar he bids you guard so well?"

The girl recoiled and watched him closely for a moment, then with the air of a beaten person choosing the less of two evils, she drew back a tattered curtain and disclosed a long brass bound box.

"It is here, sahib. I know little of the scimitar, save that a trail of blood seems to follow in its wake. My father values it more than his life. For its sake he has left his domain. I know not what to do with it."

With trembling fingers the girl unlocked the hasps of the box, disclosing a pile of richly wrought silks and tapestries. From the bottom of the box she withdrew a curved parcel about four feet long. Feverishly she unwrapped the slender covering, and revealed to Larry's astonished gaze a jeweled scimitar. It was carved in the shape of a crescent.

Somehow, it seemed to Larry that the thing was evil; it suggested strange and sinister things.

HE took the weapon gently in his hand, and marvelled at the richness of its surface. Rubies glowed and glittered like drops of blood on a platinum background. At the hilt was a huge flashing emerald. As Larry unsheathed its blade he observed its finished chased workmanship. It was of tempered Damascus steel and its blade was like the edge of a razor.

"What it means, I do not know," said the girl. "But I must guard it, and guard it well, for—"

She never finished the sentence. Larry heard a low diabolical chuckle of laughter behind him. A red mist danced suddenly before his eyes, and

he felt a staggering blow at the side of his head. But as he pitched forward, he was conscious of one single thing before oblivion overwhelmed him. He saw a brown leering face, and the hand that snatched the glittering scimitar from his grasp, bore a long jagged scar from the middle finger to the wrist!

CHAPTER III

Alone!

LARRY WESTON opened his eyes and stared into a blackness as dark as the unconsciousness from which he had just emerged. He was aware of an unpleasant taste in his mouth and a splitting pain on the right side of his head.

For a few moments, he lay perfectly still while his pounding brain essayed to grasp the situation in which his aching body found itself.

Then suddenly, he remembered. He sat up, then came to his feet. He listened intently, but there was no sound of life in the house. Cautiously he felt his way along the wall, and pushing back a curtain saw daylight in the dirty corridor. He made his way slowly through the house peering into every room, but he saw no one. The house was completely deserted.

The stairs creaked beneath his weight as he made his way down to the street. The sunlight almost blinded him as it poured down upon his bare and bloody head. He had been unable to find his sun helmet in the darkness of the room in which he had awakened. Natives stared at him curiously as he made his way through the teeming streets toward the hotel that he was beginning to regret having left.

The inquiring looks of the natives were repeated by white men as Larry walked through the lobby toward the

clerk at the desk. Noticing the scrutiny he was receiving he realized that he must cut a sorry figure with his bloody countenance and dishevelled appearance. He went up to the desk and asked for the key to his room. The native clerk peered at him suspiciously.

"Is the sahib registered?" he purred.

"Of course, I'm registered. I'm Mr. Weston."

The clerk raised his eyebrows and consulted a massive book that lay open before him.

"Mr. Weston, sahib, check out yesterday."

"Rot," said Larry. "I'm Mr. Weston. This is ridiculous."

"What's the matter here?"

The imperious voice of a white man accustomed to command, interrupted the argument. Larry turned to confront the manager of the hotel.

"See here," he began. "I'm Weston, and your clerk tells me that I checked out yesterday. He won't give me the key to my room."

The manager eyed him coldly.

"Mr. Weston checked out yesterday," he said icily. "I saw him leave with a Mr. Somers who happens to be a friend of mine. I don't know what your game is, young fellow, but whatever it is, you'd better play it a long way from here. Now get out."

"This is absurd," cried Larry. "Why, I can identify myself in a minute."

HIS hand went to his inside breast pocket in search of his wallet and papers. A startled look came into his eyes as he found it empty. Swiftly he ran his fingers through the rest of his clothing. His pockets were completely empty. Not a scrap of paper, not a single *anna* was left to him.

THE hotel manager was regarding him with a contemptuous smile as Larry went through his futile search. When he realized that he had been thoroughly stripped, he looked up into the manager's cold eyes, and knew that with his present appearance and lack of credentials he would get exactly nowhere with this man.

Rendered speechless by the turn of events, he turned silently on his heel and strode from the hotel.

In the garden outside the hostelry, he sat down on a bench beneath a tall acacia tree, and forced his aching head to ponder the remarkable situation that he found himself in.

The events that had occurred in the foul shack, the jeweled scimitar, the Indian girl and her dying father, seemed to him to be figments of some weird dream, rather than actual happenings. But the fact of his having been hit on the head and robbed was something which could not be ascribed to any hallucination.

He knew that under the circumstances it was impossible to appeal to the police or anyone else for help. If he went to the police for aid, they would certainly regard him with suspicion and hold him until they had established his identity beyond all doubt. That would take time, precious time which would give his enemies—whoever they were—time to accomplish their object—whatever that might be.

He decided that there was but one man who could help him. That was Somers, and even then, it was possible that his father's old friend had been completely duped by whoever it was that had apparently impersonated him. In any event, he must get to Marapuana.

He rose to his feet with the air of a man who has made a sudden decision, and approached an Englishman who was lounging on the hotel verandah.

"How far is it to Marapuana?" he asked.

The Englishman stared at him, adjusted his monocle.

"Something over forty miles."

"In which direction?"

"Straight north."

"Thanks."

LARRY walked from the verandah and commenced marching along the dusty road that led to the northern boundary of the town. He was conscious of an amazed Oxfordian voice shouting after him: "I say! You're not going to walk. You can't do that, you know!"

The hell I can't, thought Larry to himself as he pushed forward on the first lap of his long trek.

But six hours later, with half his journey still before him, Larry came to the painful realization that perhaps the monocled Englishman had been right after all.

The heat of the mid-day sun was terrific. It beat down upon him with a merciless persistency. A few hours back he had adjusted a thick plantain leaf to his head and it was that alone which saved him from the tortures of sunstroke.

Turbaned natives along the road stared in astonishment at this unique sight of a white man traveling through the heat of the noonday on foot.

Yet, although his head pounded like some enormous drum, although his body ached and protested at every step, Larry pushed forward. His clothes were dripping wet with perspiration, and from time to time he was compelled to brush a swarm of flies away from the hard coagulated blood at the side of his head.

Each step was torture, each new mile put him freshly on the rack, yet on he went, and the more enervated that his strength became, so the courage in his heart increased proportionately.

IT WAS almost dusk when he wearily lifted his head, and his heart gave a great bound. For there, ahead of him in the purple haze of the setting sun rose the magnificent architecture of the palace of the Rajah of Marapuana.

He stumbled forward down the road. A terrible paralysis assailed his spent muscles. His legs went suddenly numb. Despite the perspiration which soaked through his clothing, he felt chills run up and down his spine.

He gave vent to a sob of despair. It seemed that now he was actually within sight of his goal that he must fail. He clenched his teeth together, and with a tremendous effort put his right foot forward some six inches. Six inches progress at God knows what cost of painful energy.

Another step, then his knee buckled. He fell. He lay there at the side of the road for he knew not how long. He was not unconscious yet he seemed to be existing in a sort of purple haze. It was as though the misty dusk of the tropics had somehow permeated his very brain, and had rendered him impotent, drugged him with its evil essence.

He lay there utterly exhausted, breathing heavily, semi-conscious. He was aware of a faint drumming in his ears that somehow sounded different than the pounding which had hammered there for the past few hours. The drumming grew louder.

With an effort he raised his head from the ground and blinked rapidly. He looked once more at the apparition he beheld, and then decided quite definitely that he was going mad, that under the terrific strain he had endured, he was the victim of a mirage.

For before him mounted on a coal

black colt, sat the figure of a girl, trim and slim in riding breeches. Through the film that half obscured his vision he saw her dismount, walk over to him. She bent down, looked at him, then straightened up and shouted something in a language he could not understand.

In response to her command, two natives came running up. They bent over his prostrate figure and picked him up. The girl remounted, and Larry felt himself being carried forward by four powerful arms.

HE was too exhausted to make inquiries regarding his miraculous rescue, but he was aware of the fact that he was being carried toward the turrets of Marapuana. He closed his eyes, and so great was his weariness that he actually fell asleep in the brawny arms of his human vehicle.

He awoke to find a bandage about his head, and his body lying comfortably on a European bed. His eyes swept the neat small room. Then, suddenly he found himself gazing into the deep blue eyes of the girl who had rescued him. He smiled up at her.

"Well, thank Heaven, you're all right," she said. "Now if you feel strong enough will you tell me how on earth you happened to be lying in the middle of the road, with no horse, no servants, and not even the right clothes for India."

"I had just come from Rangoon," he told her.

"Rangoon? You mean you walked?"

He nodded ruefully. "Yes, I walked," he said. "It seemed a pretty good idea at the time, though I'd rather not try it again."

"I should hope not," she said emphatically. "But why did you walk?"

HE smiled disarmingly at her. "As a matter of fact, I didn't have a cent. I had to get to Marapuana somehow and immediately. So I walked."

"Well," she said. "I still don't quite understand it. But you were lucky. You're at Marapuana anyway. May I ask who you are? And who you want to see here?"

"I'm Larry Weston," he said. "Hugh Weston's son. I'd like to see a Mr. Somers. Do you know him?"

She regarded him with a strange puzzled look, then said slowly. "Yes, I know him."

"Would you ask him please to come here?"

"I happen to know that Mr. Somers isn't here just now. He's expected in in about an hour though. I'll tell him then."

"Thanks," said Larry. "I suppose it's all right to stay here until he comes?"

"Perfectly," she said and he was aware from her tone that her attitude toward him had undergone a sudden and subtle change.

However, before he could say anything more to her, there came a soft rapping at the door. In response to her invitation to enter, a huge black walked into the room, salaaming profoundly. He spoke to the girl in a tongue that Larry did not understand.

She nodded and dismissed the servant.

"The Rajah has commanded that you appear before him and explain yourself," she said. "The servant waiting outside will lead you to him!"

"Great," said Larry. "Explanations are the one thing I want to make. Lead me to this Rajah guy."

He climbed painfully from the bed, and as he left the room he noticed that the girl still stared at him with a strange worried look.

As he crossed the marble courtyard that stood before the palace, he spent little time worrying about the man who had apparently impersonated him. He felt sure that he could prevail upon the Rajah to set the cables humming to America, the answers to which would establish beyond all doubt that he was Larry Weston.

He felt more than half sure, besides, that when the man who had claimed his name was confronted with the genuine Larry, that he would wilt completely. True, he would have preferred to see Somers, before his interview with the Rajah. But now that it had happened this way, he would see it through.

Larry Weston was escorted through the most luxurious apartments that he had ever seen in his life. A long high-ceilinged hall carved from Carrara, and hung with the most magnificent tapestries led the way to the Rajah's audience chamber.

Eventually, the slave halted before a bizarre carved ebony door. He knocked softly and bowed low. Then he disappeared and left Larry to his own devices.

THE door swung open and Larry squared his shoulders and marched in. A long red carpet streaked down the full length of the room to a raised dais of gold and ivory. The distance from the door to the throne was fully fifty yards. Armed slaves formed two files between which Larry marched toward His Royal Highness the Rajah of Marapuana.

The room was thick with incense and as Larry came closer to the Indian prince, he observed a young white man seated at the Rajah's side. He bowed low as he approached, and waited for the prince to speak before he lifted his head.

A voice speaking perfect English came to his ears.

"Ah, sahib, so you are enjoying our hospitality. That is right and that is just, but may we ask how it occurs that you honor us at Marapuana with your presence?"

Larry raised his head, and opened his mouth to explain who he was and what misadventures had befallen him. Then, for a second his eyes fell full on the swarthy Brahmin who sat upon the dais. Larry, took a swift step backward, and the words which he had intended to use in explanation of his presence, evolved to a short incoherent gasp of surprise. He stood there speechless and staggered.

For the stately potentate sitting on the magnificent throne before him was none other than the man he had seen yesterday, dying of delirious fever in a fetid ramshackle hovel in the heart of Rangoon!

CHAPTER IV

The Impostor

THE Rajah broke in upon Larry's stupefied silence.

"Well," he said. "Will the sahib please give an account of himself?"

Larry considered swiftly for a moment, and decided that there was nothing for it but to tell the truth. He had not the slightest idea of what this remarkable coincidence portended, but he realized that if the Rajah was on the level, and he had heard from his father that the potentate was fair and just, he must surely support at least part of his story.

"My name is Weston, your Highness," he began. "I am the son of Hugh Weston, whom you knew quite well. I met with some misadventures in Rangoon, which left me without money. I walked here to see you and Sahib Somers."

The Rajah shot a swift glance at the white man who sat by his side.

The pasty faced, thin Caucasian returned the look slyly.

"Then since you are the son of Weston, you are prepared to produce credentials to prove your identity?"

"No," said Larry. "When I was robbed of my money, I was robbed of my papers, as well. However, if there's any doubt about the matter you can cable America. I shall remain here until you receive an answer."

The Rajah leered mockingly at him.

"You will stay here longer than that, sahib," he said ominously. "You will stay a long, long time. We have little mercy on liars and impostors here."

Larry's rage got the better of his discretion. He threw all diplomacy to the winds.

"I'm no liar," he shouted, and the fury in his voice came echoing back from those marble walls. "I'm no liar and I'm no impostor. You know where I was yesterday. You saw me yesterday. It was while I was trying to help you that I was robbed!"

The Rajah glared at him angrily.

"Are you mad?" he demanded. "Are you mad as well as a weaver of tall tales? Seize him, slaves. Seize him and confine him in the most rat-infested dungeon. Let him await my pleasure."

SOMETHING deep inside Larry Weston seemed to snap. This was the last straw. After all he had gone through to get here, after this very man who was sentencing him had apparently been a party to robbing him, this was too much!

A roar of honest rage burst from his throat, and before a slave could lay a hand on him he sprang toward the ebony dais. His right arm described a short arc, and he struck the Rajah full on the side of the face. He felt a pair of arms around his

neck, and he realized that the other white man had leaped upon him. For a moment the pair thrashed about in frantic embrace.

Then strong black arms seized him and tore him away from the other.

He turned savagely upon the white man.

"Who are you?" he snapped. "That you aid this Indian dog? Are you, too, a slave?"

The other flushed beneath the insult, then drawing himself up, he replied with a sneer.

"No. I am Larry Weston, the man whom you have so unsuccessfully tried to impersonate."

By this time the Rajah had recovered both his dignity and his throne. He sat upright glaring balefully down upon Larry.

"You shall suffer for this, dog of an unbeliever," he said in a low vibrant voice. "I need you now, but the day shall come when I shall strike you down myself with this."

He rose to his full height and with a swift gesture toward a girdle that hung about his waist, lifted high up above his head a glittering weapon. A terrible rage was stamped upon his features as he uttered the death threat.

The slaves dragged Larry around and led him from the room.

AS he was pulled outside into the corridor he realized that for the second time within a few moments, he was bewildered to the extent of being in a mental daze, for the gleaming sword that the Rajah had threatened to slay him with was the jeweled scimitar which the Indian girl had so cautiously showed him the night before.

It seemed to Larry that they descended thousands of steps before they came to a halt before a huge iron door. One of the natives opened it with a massive key. Larry was

conscious of a terrific shove from behind and he felt himself catapulted forward into the pitch darkness of his cell.

For a moment he stood stock still in the center of the prison and listened intently. He heard the scurryings of a myriad of rats, and despite the courage which was in his heart he felt momentarily faint. Carefully he walked forward with his hands outstretched.

His fingers came into contact with something soft and slimy. He jerked his hand back, but a second later he realized that it was merely the dank wall of his cell which had accumulated the underground moisture of the years.

The floor was wet, too, and it was impossible to sit down without getting a drenching. His muscles still ached from his arduous journey, and his head still pained from the blow he had received in the mysterious house in Rangoon.

HE leaned up against the wall dis- regarding the water which soaked through to his skin. He was thoroughly dejected. He saw no way out of this hell in which he was now imprisoned. He smiled bitterly to himself. He, who had come six thousand miles to avenge the death of his father was a million times more helpless than he would have been had he remained in his apartment in New York.

He sighed wearily, and stood stiffly up against the wall. Despite the utter misery and consciousness of failure in his heart, he kept his chin up, and resolved that if he must die, he would do it gallantly and without whining; he would die as his father would have wished him to die. And at the thought of his father, a tear dimmed his eyes.

* * *

George Somers sat in his room over

a whisky and soda and regarded his daughter with tender eyes. She was seated opposite him talking earnestly. If it had been anyone else, perhaps Somers would have paid little attention to the strange story that she was telling, but to him, his daughter, Betty, was the apple of his eye.

For six months now she had kept his house for him in this wilderness which knew no other white woman, and her father, while loving her as his offspring, respected her as he would have a man who shared his perils.

"But," he remonstrated. "Granting all that you say about this strange man you discovered, didn't I bring young Weston here yesterday? Weren't his papers in good order? It seems to me that if one of the two of them is an impostor, it must be your young man."

She shook her head. "I thought so at first," she replied gravely, "but I've changed my mind. I'm sure that the man I found is Larry Weston. Isn't it logical, after all, that the impostor would have the credentials? He could steal them. But a real faker wouldn't dare come here with no papers, no money or anything else."

SOMERS considered this argument for a moment in silence. "There's something in that," he conceded. "Anything else that makes you think he's Weston?"

"Yes," she said. "Do you think the man that you brought here yesterday looks at all like Hugh Weston?"

"No," he answered thoughtfully. "I can't say he does. But after all, a son doesn't have to look like his father, you know."

"Of course, he doesn't," she said impatiently. "That's not the point."

"What is the point, then?"

"The point is that the man I brought in yesterday *does* look like

Mr. Weston. There's a startling resemblance. I didn't notice it at first, but the more I think of it, the more pronounced it is."

He regarded her keenly for a moment. "You're sure of that?" he asked. "You're not letting your imagination run away with you?"

"Do I ever do that?"

"No, as a matter of fact, you don't, and perhaps you're right. There's a lot of explaining to be done around here. The murder of Weston and the theft of his papers. I can't believe the Rajah has a hand in it, he's always shot pretty square with us."

"He's changed lately," she said. "He used to be lenient and kind. I can't imagine him condemning the Weston boy to the cells."

He nodded thoughtfully. "It is unusual," he said. "But after all, he's supreme in his own domain and if he believed the boy is a thief or a cheat he's well within his rights."

"Will you look into it? Will you get permission to see the boy?"

He reached for his hat.

"I'll do that and right now," he said. "Perhaps there is more in this business than meets the eye. I'll see his nibs immediately."

He strode from the room and made his way toward the palace.

On his way over he was joined by the white man who had seemingly convinced the Rajah that he was Larry Weston. For the first time Somers regarded him with a slight suspicion. Betty had been so insistent that by now he more than half believed that the man he had brought in from Rangoon was a faker.

"Going in to see the big shot?"

SOMERS nodded. "I want to get permission to see that kid that he sent to the dungeons last night. I hear he raised quite a row in the audience chamber."

The other glanced at him sharply.

"Yes," he said. "I think he's a little cracked. Why he doesn't even look like me."

"No?" said Somers reflectively. "I haven't seen him yet, but I'm going to."

The younger man shot him a look that was not entirely free from apprehension.

"You can't see him. No one can. The Rajah has given strict orders."

"I can get a favor from the Rajah, I guess," said Somers.

"He seems pretty set on this. Say —" the other changed the subject quickly. "When are we going out after this treasure? It seems to me that we're just wasting time."

"We can't do a thing until we find your father's lost maps," Somers told him. "I've already told you that."

"You've got no idea where the place is, then?"

"None at all."

Somers watched him keenly as he spoke. He thought he saw a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. Why should a man appear content when he believes that he has lost his father and fortune? Every moment that passed bolstered Somers' growing suspicion that somehow, in some mysterious manner, Betty's theory was correct.

When Somers sent in a message to the effect that he wished to see the Rajah, it occurred to him how things about the palace had changed since the death of Weston, senior. Before, an audience with the prince was a simple accomplishment.

THE Rajah who had been educated in the Occident waived formalities with the white men and seemed genuinely anxious to see them. But now, it was easier to obtain an interview with the President of the United States than it was to see the high-caste Brahmin.

In fact, Somers reflected, as he

waited for the return of the messenger, he had not seen the Rajah more than once this past month, and that was a casual meeting in the courtyard, near his own quarters.

The servant returned and spoke in Hindustani.

"His Highness will see sahib Weston. The sahib Somers must wait."

Somers flushed at this insulting message. He certainly had more right to the interview than this man—impostor or not—who stood beside him.

Weston grinned at him and started off down the corridor. For a moment Somers hesitated, undecided, then with a firmly set jaw, he followed.

Weston continued down the long cavern-like corridor, unaware of the fact that Somers was following him. To the latter's surprise, Weston did not turn into the portal which led to the audience chamber. Instead he walked past that door and entered a smaller adit further on, which Somers knew opened into a small ante-room.

Somers frowned, puzzled, that this youngster in two short days was so at home in the palace. He came to the door where the other had disappeared. He stopped as he heard an eager voice.

"He knows nothing," came the tones of the man who called himself Weston. "He just admitted that he has no idea where it is."

"Good," came the voice of the Rajah. "Then it should be easy. We shall start tomorrow. We—"

Somers rapped quickly on the door and entered before either of the occupants had time to invite him in, or to keep him out. The Rajah, seated at an inlaid table, glared at him.

"By what right do you dare invade my privacy?" he demanded.

Somers bowed. "For that I apologize, your Highness. But I sent in word that I must see you on a matter of great importance."

"I would have seen you later. Can't this matter wait?"

NO. I believe that you have cast an innocent man into the dungeons."

"An innocent man!" cried the Indian. But Somers noticed the white man's cheek drain itself of color. "An innocent man! He is an impostor."

"Perhaps. But may I see him?"

"No. I have issued strict orders on that score. Now leave us alone, Sahib Somers. I wish to discuss some private matters with the son of an old friend."

"The son of an old friend," said Somers ironically. Then quickly he turned on the white man.

"Where was your father born?" he snapped.

"Why-er-why—New York," came the alarmed reply.

"Of course," said Somers impatiently. "We all know that. But where? What street?"

The other mumbled something unintelligible. Then the Rajah rose to his feet, a terrible wrath flaming from his deep black eyes.

"Will you leave us," he snarled. "Will you leave us or must I take disciplinary measures? I am in control here, Somers."

Somers noted the omission of the title "Sahib." He bowed and remained silent fighting back the angry words that rose to his tongue. Then he turned and left the room.

But as he walked down that long marble corridor once more, he realized that his daughter had been right. The man in that rank, infested dungeon was the son of his dead friend. The man now closeted with the Rajah was an impostor.

He remembered the Rajah's words as he had entered the room. "We shall start tomorrow," he had said. Very well, Somers would start tonight.

IN the native quarters at the rear of the garden, he found Singhi. He took him aside and spoke to him very seriously as one would speak to a child upon whom he must make clear a matter of great importance. "Singhi," he began. "You loved Sahib Weston."

The tribesman nodded. "Ay," he said. "He was a great chief."

"Then you must help me save his son."

It took Somers almost an hour to make the native understand what must be done. Then Somers left him for a moment, returning to his own quarters where he took an automatic from his baggage and dropped it in his coat pocket. On the way out he thrust his head through the mosquito netting of his daughter's room.

"Don't ask me any questions," he said. "There's but little time to spare. We're taking the trail tonight. Have things ready as soon as possible."

He left her puzzled but excited, packing their knapsacks with slim agile fingers.

CHAPTER V

The Rescue

LARRY WESTON stood ankle deep in water and shivered. How long he had been in the midst of this damnable darkness he had not the slightest idea. For him time had stood utterly still. His feet were numbed and insensible to further pain. He coughed violently from time to time, and his whole aching body wracked with the effort.

The dripping of water and the soft scurrings of vermin had lost their terror by their very repetition. His eyes had become used to the darkness. Save for the two occasions when the door had opened to reveal a slave who brought him food and water, he had seen no ray of

light since he had been confined in this black hole of Hades.

DESPITE his natural courage, he realized that he was nearly done. There is, after all, a limit to human endurance. There is a point of suffering beyond which man can not go without his reason leaving him first, and it was of this contingency that Larry was afraid.

He shivered violently as the damp, wet atmosphere of his cell seemed to pierce his very being. And the terrible pain that gnawed at his body was as nothing to the grim devils of madness which poured their poison into his brain.

Once he had started to shriek with insane laughter and the weird macabre echo which had come to his own ears startled him more than the fear of death. He realized that he could stand this horrible torture, but little more. So a desperate plan began to formulate itself in his brain.

Anything was better than this. He resolved that the next time the heavy door to his prison was opened, he would fling himself at the servant who brought his food. True, his weakened condition hardly promised that he could overpower the muscular native, but even though he should die in the struggle, death itself was better than this.

He heard the faint sound of a footstep without, and he turned toward the place where the door would open. With a tremendous effort, he tensed his muscles and prepared to sell his life dearly in the struggle which would ensue.

He heard the clanging of metal as the bolts were drawn on the door. Water rippled as he took a step forward. He blinked his eyes as a lantern's yellow beam flashed through the doorway. Then, summoning every last ounce of his waning strength, he sprang.

As he hurtled through the air, his right hand clenched itself into a fist and swung in a wide arc. More by accident than design, it hit the mark he had intended for it. It landed on the point of a man's jaw.

Larry knew that by the feel of the blow. But accuracy is not enough. The blow glanced off like the weak futile smack of a child. That youthful arm had lost all of its power, the strain of the past hours had sapped its vitality.

Larry sobbed incoherently as he realized how weak he was. He fell to his knees and shouted bitterly to the figure who had so completely vanquished him.

"All right. Kill me! Kill me! But don't send me back to that hell hole. I won't go. I won't go."

A soft voice whispered into his ear; a white man's voice; a wonderful reassuring voice that brought new hope, new strength with it.

"Take it easy, son. You're not going back in there. You're coming with me, and pull yourself together. We'll need all our brains and strength this night. Come on now."

A PAIR of strong arms pulled Larry to his feet and he found himself gazing into the honest countenance of Somers. Wonder and surprise came over his face.

"You—you're Somers?"

"I'm Somers, Larry," said his rescuer. "But we'll talk about it later. There's work ahead. Are you strong enough to travel tonight?"

"I'm strong enough for anything that'll take me out of here."

Somers nodded approvingly. "Come on. Help him, Singhi."

The huge black man from the border who had worshipped Hugh Weston, put a brawny arm about his son and helped him up the long flight of winding steps that led from the palace dungeons.

Somers led the way through a rear exit from the palace in order that their escape should not be observed. He took Larry to his quarters after whispering some swift instructions to Singhi.

The cordial greeting of Betty and a stiff pony of brandy set the blood coursing once again through Larry's veins. A thousand questions were on the tip of his tongue, but Somers would permit no conversation.

"Not now," he said. "We have little time, and you must lie down and regain your strength. We must be far from here when the Rajah finds you missing. We're leaving in half an hour and my only hope is that the native who's feeding you down there doesn't make a trip until after we have a good start. There are a number of explanations to be given on each side, son, but we'll give them later. I'm quite satisfied that you're Hugh's son and that's all that counts for the time being."

He forced Larry to lie down on the bed and rest while he and Betty assembled the supplies for the trip. In about twenty minutes Somers pronounced them ready. No sooner had he declared this, than a rapping at the door disclosed the grinning face of Singhi.

"I have five boy, sahib," he announced. "We have food and supplies ready. We can start now."

"Good," said Somers. "Ready Larry."

LARRY dragged his weary muscles from the bed, and tired and exhausted as he was, this new turn of events had given him fresh courage, and had revealed reserves of strength that he hardly realized he possessed.

As silently as possible, the two men, the girl and the six native boys, headed by the loyal Singhi, set out toward the black fringe of

Jungle which stood dark against the moonlit sky to the south of the Rajah's domain. Whither they traveled, Larry had not the slightest idea, yet he did not question the decision of the man who had saved his life.

HE walked between Somers and Betty. The former had not permitted him to carry anything save a Colt thirty-eight which Somers had forced upon him. The cool air of the tropic night fell softly upon them, and to Larry who had spent the past few hours in a stuffy dank hell, the fresh drafts of oxygen were as heady and refreshing as sweet and rare wine.

They were less than half a mile from the edge of the jungle when Somers stopped dead in his tracks, and uttered a sharp warning sound. The little cavalcade also stopped. Somers bent to the ground and put his ear against the warm soil.

He straightened up with a look of grave concern on his face.

"They've missed us," he said. "The Rajah's Gurkhas are on our trail. I can hear the patter of their bare feet on the ground. Quick! Our only chance is to make the jungle before they catch us. We can lose them there, but if they catch us here on the plain, God help us."

The procession broke into something between a dog-trot and a canter. To his consternation, Larry realized, after the first few steps that he was not strong enough to keep up with the others. Twice the little band slowed down to permit him to catch up. He turned miserably to Somers.

"You go on," he said. "There's no point in us all getting killed because of me."

"Nonsense," snapped Somers.

He turned and barked an order to Singhi. Larry felt a pair of

iron-like arms go about him and he was abruptly lifted off his feet. Singhi grinned down at him as he ran swiftly and easily with Larry in his arms. Their speed picked up considerably under this new arrangement.

Then, suddenly as they had almost reached their goal Larry heard a peculiar hissing sound in the air. A shout of alarm rang from Somers.

"They're on us. Take cover and fire, Larry."

Larry freed himself from the giant tribesman's arms on the very edge of the black mass of vegetation that was before them. Behind, silhouetted in the ghastly light of the moon he saw a score of wiry little figures. Again he heard that strange hissing noise and looked up to see a savagely curved knife fly through the air over his head. The weapon buried itself in a tree trunk and remained quivering.

Larry's hand flew to his pocket and he produced the thirty-eight which Somers had given him. Even as he leveled the weapon and fired he heard the staccato crackle of Somers' own weapon. In a moment the stillness of the night was shattered by the firing of three revolvers, as Betty courageously entered the fray with an automatic.

Beside Larry stood Singhi. He was still grinning and in his hand he held a vicious looking dirk. He seemed to wait anxiously until the enemy got into close enough quarters for him to wield his ugly weapon.

AS the trio of pistols hurled their savage harbingers of death into the ranks of the enemy, Larry saw the gallant little fighters of the Rajah decimated. But even though their comrades fell to the earth mortally wounded, those that remained on their feet did not lessen the viciousness of their attack.

Nothing but death could stop the renowned Gurkhas. On they came, and now even the swift reloading of the three whites could not stay them. Closer and closer they pressed. Until, at last, with his grin more pronounced than ever, Singhi stepped into the fray wielding his huge knife about him, like the reaper himself, cutting down men relentlessly.

The whole jungle was filled with the savage shouting of the fighting natives. The whites now held their fire as their own boys engaged hand to hand with the men of the Rajah. They dared not fire for fear of hitting their own men.

Then, of a sudden, a single lithe form detached itself from the group of struggling brown men and charged with a fanatical abandon to where the whites stood breathlessly watching the encounter.

BEFORE Somers could realize it, the little man was upon him with a wild shout. He sprang through the air, his curved knife hissing venomously as he came. The blade flashed above his head. Betty gave a little gasp of dismay, and at precisely that moment, Larry's finger constricted on his thirty-eight.

The brown man made a horrible gurgling sound and fell forward upon Somers. His crescent shaped weapon fell to the ground. Somers was drenched in his adversary's blood, as the Gurkha gave vent to his death groan. Larry bent down and extricated Somers from his the horrible weight that was upon him.

Then, over to their left, Larry heard Singhi give a shout of triumph, as the remaining four men of the Rajah deciding that the odds against them were too great turned tail and fled precipitately over the plain. Larry, still weak, and trembling from the excitement he had just

undergone, leaned against a huge tree trunk and breathed heavily. Somers turned to Singhi.

"We'll make camp in the nearest likely place you can find," he said. "But make sure it's hidden well enough so that the Rajah's men can not find us."

Singhi grinned his perfect agreement and led the way through the jungle.

It was slow going, and Larry was breathing hard when at last, Singhi stopped and issued orders to his men. Larry noticed that of the five that had started out there were but three left. But at present he was too utterly exhausted to make any inquiries. Furthermore, he was quite sure that he knew the answer.

Gratefully, he threw himself on the ground before the campfire which Singhi had built. Somers and his daughter were already there. Then for the first time since they had been attacked they exchanged conversation. Somers extended his hand and said:

"Thanks. You saved my life. I'll never forget it."

Larry took his hand and glanced from the steady, honest eyes of the man to the blue depths of his daughter's.

"And you've each saved mine," he said huskily. "May God give me strength to repay you."

They shook hands in emotional silence.

CHAPTER VI

Kidnaped

NOW," said Somers, "there's a lot of talking to be done on both sides. But before we start I want to ask you a question."

"Go ahead."

"I suppose you know where your father was born?"

"Certainly. New York. On West 74th Street. We lived there for almost twenty years."

Somers nodded with satisfaction. "I'm glad you knew the answer," he said. "It's more than the other Larry Weston knew."

BETTY eyed him keenly across the flaming embers.

"So that's what convinced you," she commented.

"That and a number of other things," said her father. "Now, Larry—for I'm thoroughly convinced now that you are Larry—I'll tell you my part of the story first."

"Shoot," said Larry. "And I only hope that you know all the answers. I've met up with more mystery in the past few days than I ever believed existed."

Somers shook his head dubiously. "I can't explain all of it," he said. "But perhaps, it'll help a little. Now listen. Your father and I accidentally learned of a lost temple in the middle of the jungle. No one knew exactly where it was, but it was known that it belonged to an age-old lost tribe of Brahmins. Fabulous wealth in jewelry is reputed to exist there.

"Inasmuch as the temple was supposed to lie within the realm of the Rajah of Marapuana, your father and I sought an audience with him. We found him gentlemanly and friendly, and he quickly came to terms with us, offering us his hospitality while we searched for the temple with the understanding that he was to receive one-third of whatever we found.

Your father took out a small party on the search. I was down with a touch of fever and had to stay behind. When your father returned, he told me that he had found the temple. He was greatly excited. He left me to dress for an audience with the Rajah. He was to give me

the details later. He also mentioned that his maps of the route were in his knapsack. He asked me to send a cable to you so that you could be in at the finish of the adventure. Then I left him, and that was the last time I ever saw him alive."

Somers lapsed into silence for a moment. The eerie light of the flickering camp fire cast unearthly shadows which faded and died in the thick shadows beyond the radius of its light. Larry's face was pale and tense, and his eyes were moist. Somers gravely sucked at his pipe. He sighed heavily, then continued:

"A couple of hours later, I went to your father's quarters. He lay on the floor with a knife thrust deep into his heart. I bent over him in time to hear him mutter something about 'the sixth door.' Then he died. That's all I know about the affair. Now what's your story?"

Larry cleared his throat of the lump which had risen in it at the thought of his slain parent, then sparing no detail he related the succession of mysterious events that had befallen him since he left New York. When he finished his recital, Somers and Betty gazed thoughtfully into the fire. The girl spoke first.

"You're positive that it was the Rajah you saw in that hovel in Bangoon?"

"Absolutely," said Larry. "Do you happen to know if the Rajah has a daughter? The girl that I followed may furnish some clue."

"He has a daughter," said Somers. "But I've never seen her. These high-caste Indians keep their women strictly in their own quarters."

"Well," said Larry, "it's too much for me, but from what you say, the Rajah seems to have stolen the map."

SOMERS nodded. "It does seem that way, although I would have sworn he was on the level."

Larry's face grew grim and hard. "Then," he said slowly, "if he stole the map it was he who murdered my father. That seems obvious enough."

Somers flung a friendly arm about the young man's shoulder. "Don't go off half-cocked, son," he advised. "Let's not jump to conclusions. If we get to that temple first, we may solve a lot of these mysteries."

"How can we get to the temple first?" put in Betty. "If they have the map, they'll go direct; we'll have to walk over half the jungle to find it."

"No," said Somers, shaking his head. "I've got an ace in the hole. Don't forget Singhi. He was with Weston when he discovered the lost temple. He'll lead us there, and we've got twelve hours start on the enemy."

"Then let's use our handicap in sleep," said Betty. "Larry here needs his strength, and we have to make an early start."

The two men agreed, and less than half an hour later the only sign of life in the camp were the flashing, alert eyes of the tribesman, Singhi, as he kept vigil over his sleeping comrades.

Morning came, and with it the damp miasma that rose steaming from the moist vegetation toward the relentless sun. Somers superintended the striking of the camp and the packing of their supplies. From the data that Singhi had given him, he figured it should be about three days until they could reach the temple that his dead friend had discovered.

Slowly and arduously the gallant little band made its way through the impeding jungle. It seemed as though the tangled growth through which they fought their way was a reasoning entity that somehow resented the intrusion of the white man.

Hour after hour they went on, led by the muscular figure of Singhi, who seemed tireless, and whose sense of direction seemed nothing less than miraculous to Larry, who had not the slightest idea toward which point of the compass they were progressing.

It was almost noon. Singhi, as usual, was in front. Two black boys flanked him, while the two men and the girl followed next. Once Larry turned quickly, a startled expression on his face. In reply to Somers' inquiring look, he laughed sheepishly.

"I thought I heard a footstep," he said. "I guess it's nerves."

"Probably some animal," said Somers, and for a few moments the episode was forgotten. But for a few moments only. Then once again it flamed to the fore and burned itself into Larry's memory, where 't remained for the rest of his life.

"What a gorgeous flower!" he heard Betty exclaim suddenly. At the moment he paid but little attention to it.

She moved up slightly in advance and to the left of the procession. Larry watched her idly as she stooped down and plucked a flaming red blossom from a bush. Then, for a fraction of a second she disappeared behind a huge sinuous vernal plant. Larry saw a flash of her khaki outfit between the overhanging plantain vines.

THEN suddenly he was aware of a tramping of heavy feet. A shrill human scream ripped through the jungle, sending her startled denizens to cover. Somers and Larry stood stock still for a moment in their tracks, then raced to the spot where they had last seen the girl.

She was not there!

They stared wildly about them, but it was impossible to see more than six feet ahead in that tangled

impeding growth. From somewhere in the midst of the green maze a low mocking laugh came to their ears. Footsteps sounded faintly in the distance, then once more there was silence—a heavy ominous silence pregnant with evil foreboding things.

Somers stared at Larry with a terrible definite fear stamped in his apprehensive eyes.

"The swine," he said hoarsely. "They've got Betty. The dirty—"

Larry said nothing while the other cursed the men who had stolen his daughter.

"We've got to work quickly," he said after he had considered the situation. "The longer we wait the farther away they'll get. It's dangerous, but we'd better split up. We've got more chance of finding them that way. We can try tracking them watching for broken underbrush where a man has stepped. Look!"

He pointed toward the matted floor of the jungle, indicating a spot that had been recently disturbed by a heavy footfall. As they both glanced downward, a peculiar hissing sound rent the air. Looking up, Larry saw a still quivering arrow sunk almost to the haft in a tree trunk. Something white fluttered on its end.

WITH a swift gesture Larry stretched his hand out and snatched the torn piece of paper from the arrow's haft. Then with out reading it, he turned around and strained his eyes as he scanned every foot of the greenery for some sign of human habitation. He saw absolutely nothing.

He unfolded the paper and read aloud to the grim visaged Somers.

"If you return at once, the girl shall be released. If you attempt to find her or disobey these instructions, she shall die!"

There was no signature. Larry looked at Somers and saw the awful mute suffering in his face.

"I guess there's nothing left for it," said Larry quietly. "We'll turn back at once."

Somers reached out and seized him in a vise-like grip upon the arm. When he spoke his voice was husky with emotion.

"No," he said. "We shall not turn back. Your father lost his life over this, and now that my daughter is threatened I shall not quit. We'll find her. We'll go on."

Larry gripped his hand silently. They turned and walked back to the spot where the native boys were watching them curiously.

After a short conference, Somers decided to try Larry's suggestion. It was arranged that the party split up, that is, they were to march through the jungle fifty paces apart, slowly and thoroughly were they to search.

"You have a compass," said Somers, "and these boys have a sense of direction that will get them anywhere. Whether or not anyone has anything to report we will meet here again in twelve hours. Watch your landmarks carefully, Larry."

LARRY nodded, and in a few moments the six of them had spread out and were slowly beating their way through the dense, almost impenetrable jungle. In a few moments Larry had completely lost sight of the others. Though he could hear them floundering through the foliage he saw no sign of them. It was with heavy heart that he fought his way through the restraining tentacles of the jungle.

He realized full well the futility of the search that they had undertaken. The chances of locating the girl and those who had kidnaped her in this vast unfathomable green

hell was tantamount to searching for the proverbial needle in the haystack. He had traveled for almost an hour when he pulled up suddenly and stopped short. For there came clearly to his ears the sound of human speech.

His first thought was that it was the natives of his own party, but as he listened he realized that the dialect hardly resembled that of Singhi and his compatriots. He withdrew the thirty-eight from his pocket and cautiously advanced.

His heart beat a trifle faster as he noticed a broad clearing in the jungle some few feet ahead. An elaborate tent had been pitched in the middle of the treeless expanse, and there were signs that a luxurious camp had been made in this spot. Slowly he approached, pistol held in readiness before him.

Then suddenly before he was even aware of it tenuous brown steel wrapped itself around him and held him pinioned. He struggled desperately, and for a moment succeeded in breaking the grip that rendered him powerless.

Swiftly he raised his revolver and, turning, leveled it at the Indian who had attacked him, but even before his finger could constrict on the trigger, two more brown figures launched themselves at him.

HE was no match for the three Indians, especially as he had not yet regained his full strength which had been so sapped by his misadventures of his few days in this utterly mad country. A potent chocolate-colored hand wrenched his weapon from his grasp, and four arms propelled him along in their midst toward the large tent in the center of the clearing.

Prisoner though he was, Larry kept a sharp eye out for some sign of Betty as he was dragged toward

the head man of the outfit. But he saw nothing of her, nor anything that would indicate her presence.

There was a short parley with a man who was obviously the sentinel of the tent, then Larry was delivered over to his charge. The guard, thrusting an ugly looking dirk up against his back forced him into the tent.

Despite its size there was but little furnishings in the elaborate canvas structure. Larry noticed a table at the far end, behind which, seated in a dim light was the figure of a man. The escort stopped him abruptly before the desk, then bowing low made a long speech in Hindustani.

The man at the table looked up, and despite the dimness of the light Larry gave vent to a gasp of apprehension as his eyes recognized the familiar but wholly unwelcome face of the Rajah of Marapana!

CHAPTER VII

Escape and Capture

AH, sahib, and what are you doing in the midst of the jungle?"

The Rajah spoke in excellent English, and it seemed to Larry that there was a kindly tone in his voice which puzzled the American considerably. He hastily decided that it was politic to evade the question.

"I have lost my comrades," he said. "I am searching for them."

"Then," said the Rajah, "you must be tired and spent. You must eat and rest, then I shall help you find your party." He turned to the guard and for the first time noticed Larry's thirty-eight which had been taken from him. He spoke in dialect to the native. The latter bowed his head and sheepishly handed Larry back his weapon. The Rajah smiled.

"I must apologize, sahib," he said,

"for the impetuosity of my men in disarming you. If you will follow this man he will see that you are fed and rested. After that you and I will discuss ways and means of finding your safari."

An utterly bewildered Larry followed the native from the tent. His brain was in a whirl as the man led him through the clearing to a place where winding smoke indicated that cooking was being done.

And as he ate the food which the natives respectfully served him, he tried to cope with this new and unexpected angle to the situation. Here was the Rajah from whom he had escaped; the same man that had sent his Gurkhas in pursuit, and judging from their actions, had given them orders to kill, here he was doing a complete about face. Treating his prisoner of yesterday like a gentleman, feeding him and making offers of assistance.

PERHAPS, Larry thought, he was being played with, delaying punishment to amuse himself. But on second thought that seemed impossible. The Rajah's demeanor, his words, his tone were not those of a man contemplating a vicious or cruel action. Nevertheless, whatever the answer to this new mystery was, Larry resolved to say nothing, to leave all the talking to his captor, or his host, whichever the man might be.

He was still by no means sure whether or not the Rajah had Betty somewhere in the camp. It seemed likely. Yet every theory that he evolved fell down when he recalled the hospitality which the Brahmin Prince had just extended to him.

As he ate he watched the natives closely to see if by any action they would betray that something unusual was going on in the camp, to see if any clue to Betty's whereabouts should offer itself.

He discovered nothing, and after he had eaten and been given a hammock to recline in, his former guard approached and made it known by elaborate signs that the Rajah desired to speak to him. Larry once again entered the tent.

The Rajah rose politely as he came up to the table. Then he peered intently at the young American through the dim light. An expression of surprise came over his swarthy features.

"Haven't I seen you before?" he asked.

"You have," said Larry, grimly wondering what tack this conversation was going to take.

The Rajah nodded his head. "I thought so," he said. "And I wish to express my gratitude to you. I shall gather my men now to assist you in searching for your comrades. Will you wait here until I return?"

Larry nodded and bowed as the Rajah walked past him and disappeared through the flap at the entrance to the tent. Larry's brows furrowed perplexedly as he watched the portly figure vanish beyond the canvas.

HOWEVER, whatever might be the purport of this sudden geniality on the part of the Rajah, Larry keenly remembered one thing, and that was that no matter what had taken place today, this same man who had just bade him wait, had only two days ago incarcerated him in a hell hole that had driven him to the brink of insanity.

That fact was salient in his mind as he considered the situation. Perhaps the man had changed, as it ostensibly appeared, and then again, perhaps it was merely another of his subtle oriental tricks. In any event with a vivid picture of that cell stamped on his mind, Larry decided not to gamble.

He took a single swift look about to make sure that he was unobserved, then he tiptoed toward the tent's entrance. Once there he made a dash for the cover of the jungle and disappeared in its maze-like cover before any member of the Rajah's cortege could see him.

HE decided that the best thing to do was to return to the rendezvous that Somers had selected and report what he had seen. Perhaps the older man would have a theory that would fit the circumstances.

Certainly it seemed to prove that the Rajah was directly responsible for the kidnapping of Betty. Yet even though all logic pointed to that fact with an apparently irrefutable array of circumstances, Larry could not forget the kindly voice, the open handed hospitality of the Rajah, and the returning of his thirty-eight was a point which simply could not be reconciled with the other facts of the case.

He floundered on through the tearing brush, watching carefully for the landmarks that he had stored away in his mind on the way out. He estimated that by now he was almost half way back to his starting point.

His eye was abruptly caught by the trembling of a leaf. He watched it sharply. The leaf moved aside, and the ominous barrel of an automatic stared into his eyes. Larry's eyes traveled beyond the gun and they rested on the hand that held it, he felt the blood surge excitedly through his veins. For on the hand that now threatened him was a long jagged white scar.

The foliage rustled and there stepped out before him the Hindu that had spoken to him on the boat. He grinned evilly.

"I expect you look for the memsahib," he said with a leer.

"Yes," said Larry steadily. "And

if you don't want the United States Government on your trail you'd better take me to her at once."

The Hindu smiled contemptuously. "Your government is powerless here," he said. "This is the domain of the Rajah of Marapuana. Yet I will take you to the memsahib. Come."

He brandished the revolver in a manner that precluded any misunderstanding of his meaning. Larry turned and accompanied his captor deeper into the wilderness.

For hours they struggled onward through the jungle. The Hindu with the gun trained untiringly on Larry's back walked in the rear, making the other break the trail for him. Panting and exhausted Larry staggered forward.

But notwithstanding the pain in his muscles, there was an eager light in his eye. For there was at least one point in his favor. He was being led to Betty. Furthermore, the Hindu who had just captured him had neglected to remove the thirty-eight from his pocket.

He realized that once he arrived at the place he was being escorted to, he would be made a prisoner, but at least he would have found Betty, and he had a weapon in his pocket. These were two things that amply compensated him for the hardship he was undergoing at this particular moment.

THE sun was sinking and a heavy dusk fell over the jungle when Larry smelt the savory odor of curried meat being cooked. A few moments later he heard natives jabbering ahead somewhere. For the first time since he had been taken so completely unawares, the Hindu spoke to him.

"We are almost there. You shall soon see the memsahib, even though it be for the last time."

The sentence ended in an evil chuckle and Larry did not dare look around for fear that the other would see the color drain from his face as he heard the veiled threat.

At last they reached the camp. Larry was astonished at its size. Fully half a hundred men were here. Yet it certainly was not the camp of the Rajah that he had already visited that day. The natives stared at him and a wave of low murmurs swept over them as they saw the white man brought ignominiously to their lair.

The man with the scar paid scant attention to them, however, as he stalked haughtily through their midst. Quite obviously he was their leader, Larry decided, judging from the deferential manner in which they greeted him.

A hastily constructed tent stood down at the far end of the clearing. It was to this that Larry was marched. His captor stopped before the tent and shouted something to a couple of his followers who stood curiously nearby.

IN response to his command, Larry was roughly seized and bound with strong leathery thongs. Then he was thrown rudely into the canvas shelter. He heard the men walk away as he rolled over to the hard ground, panting and spent.

A soft familiar voice in his ear startled him.

"Larry!"

He half rolled over and found himself gazing into the eyes of Betty.

"Thank God," he exclaimed, "I've found you."

"Ssh," she cautioned. "Don't talk so loud, they may hear us."

In a low tone he related to her his experiences of the day, and when he had concluded he questioned her.

She could, however, supply him

with little information. She had been carried off by two natives, she had been bound and left here in the tent. Save for the man who had brought her food and water she had seen no one and heard less.

Larry stopped talking and lent all his strength to the matter of trying to break the bond that bit harshly into the flesh of his wrists. But the thongs, while pliable were strong, stronger than the muscular arms that had tied them there.

A shadow obscured the fading light that poured through the open flap of the tent. Larry looked up to see the man who had captured him standing there.

"I have kept my promise, sahib," the Hindu said mockingly. "I have brought you to the memsahib. I trust that you are duly grateful. Gaze at her well, because after to-night, you shall see her no more."

"What do you mean?" said Larry. "Do you think to frighten us with your threats?"

"Threats?" purred the other. "No, not that, sahib, for to keep my men in good humor so that they will be ready for work when they meet the Rajah at the temple, I must amuse them. You two shall supply the amusement."

There was a low throaty laugh and the man was gone. Larry glanced anxiously over toward the girl. Her pretty face was sapped of all its usual color, and her eyes revealed a startled horror.

"Don't let him scare you," said Larry reassuringly. "He's only trying to frighten us."

SHE shook her head miserably. "No, he's not," she said. "I know these wild tribesmen that he has with him. They'll torture us to death and make it an excuse for a feast. They hate the whites."

"Then," said Larry assuming a

cheerfulness which he was far from feeling. "There's only one answer to that problem. We mustn't be here when they come to prepare the sacrifice."

After these words he made a renewed onslaught upon his bonds. The veins stood out on his forehead and his whole aching body protested at the tremendous effort. But for a long while he made but little headway.

As he struggled he could hear, outside the tent, the preparations for the orgy that was to come. Blazing. He heard the weird throaty shouts of the natives as the tom toms beat out their chants, louder and louder, ominous and sinister, redolent of evil. Larry shuddered despite himself. He dared not look at the girl.

DESPERATELY he looked about the tent for some object that he could use as a knife. He noticed that there was but a single article there. A long narrow wooden box with strange hieroglyphics carved upon it. Dangling on a hasp in its centre was a padlock, and his heart gave a sudden bound as he noticed that the padlock had carelessly been left unlocked.

Swiftly he rolled over the ground toward the box. After a number of clumsy efforts, he succeeded in opening it. By sitting on its edge and leaning backward he discovered that his hands could grope among the silks that it contained. Into the soft fabric ran his fingers, then it seemed that his heart must stop still in excitement. For his groping fingers felt something solid, something hard, something long—a sword scabbard.

His hand closed about it, and he dropped from the box to the ground again, then rolling over once more

he let his eyes rest on the prize he had extracted from the carved box.

With blinking eyes, Larry Weston found himself staring at the gorgeous jewelled scimitar that he had beheld in the hands of the Rajah's daughter in that ramshackle hovel in Rangoon. And so great was its glittering beauty that he found even in these circumstances he found time to admire its scintillating radiance.

He heard Betty's little gasp of mingled hope and apprehension, as placing the weapon behind him he endeavored to withdraw its blade from the sheath.

It was slow work but at last the Damascus steel came free of its scabbard. Gingerly, Larry tilted it up and rubbed the things that bound his wrists. He felt the warm blood run down his hands as the keen blade bit into the flesh, but he had little time to notice such trifles now.

Again he felt a sharp prick as the razor-like edge slashed him, but then, a moment later, his suffering earned its reward and his hands were free. It was the work of a moment to slash the thongs that bound his feet and then to perform the same office for Betty.

THEY sat there for a moment rubbing life back into their cramped muscles, sighing with relief as the blood surged back through their arteries.

Outside, the maddening native drums had grown louder, the chanting was stronger and more potent, more threatening. Weird shadows thrown by the myriad fires of the celebration threw ghastly dancing shadows through the flap of the tent. Cautiously Larry rose to his feet and helped Betty up.

Hastily he thrust the revolver in her hand.

"Take this. We've got to run for

it. If you see any one. Shoot first and investigate afterwards."

"But what about you?" she asked. "Are you armed?"

"I'll take this," he said grimly lifting up the gleaming scimitar. "It seems to be even more valuable than it looks. Follow me."

He stepped to the tent's entrance and peered cautiously out. He saw a myriad of strange black figures seated around the crimson licking tongues of the fires. No one, it seemed was guarding the tent. Evidently they were trusting to the bonds to hold their prisoners. And they were right too, save for their negligence in leaving that box unlocked.

"Right," Larry whispered hoarsely. "Now."

CHAPTER VIII

The Jeweled Scimitar

SILENTLY the pair glided from the tent and raced across the clearing which intervened between them and the welcome cover of the jungle. They had almost reached the sheltering cover, when they heard a wild shout behind them.

"Faster," yelled Larry. "They've spotted us."

Peril lent wings to their feet. Like greyhounds they raced madly toward the black jungle which somehow had lost its sinister aspect and seemed to have become a welcome haven.

A hissing black shadow for all the world like a flock of evil birds flashed over their heads and buried itself in the vegetation before them.

"Blow arrows," cried the girl. "Watch out. There's deadly poison on those arrow tips."

At the very fringe of the cover, she turned, and despite the peril which surrounded her, her hand was

steady enough as she emptied Larry's thirty-eight into the horde of lithe brown figures that charged upon her.

Larry threw his arm around her and together they disappeared into the jungle. Deeper and deeper they penetrated into the cover of the growth. All around them they heard the excited yelling of the brown men as they searched for their quarry. Naked feet scuffed against the dry brush. And from time to time Larry recognized the harsh voice of the man with the scar shouting orders.

Larry smiled grimly to himself. If his captor was furious at the escape he would be insane with rage when he discovered the robbery of his unlocked box. A little scream from Betty caused him to turn suddenly. A grinning brown face stared into his. A knife flashed above his head.

WITH a single flashing gesture, he whipped the mighty scimitar from its sheath, and swept it down in a savage blow. The brown man gave vent to a horrible gasp, and fell forward full on his gory face. Larry sheathed the sword again, and putting his arms around the trembling girl, he led her farther on into the jungle.

As they progressed the sounds of the futile searching of their pursuers became fainter and fainter until it died away altogether. Still, Larry was by no means completely reassured. True, he had snatched the girl from a terrible fate, and incidentally, he had stolen the scimitar which eventually might explain a number of things.

But in the meantime Betty and he were wondering about in the jungle at midnight, without water or food. Despite his compass he was by no means certain of his bearings.

Together they fought their way through the ominous darkness of the jungle. Larry kept his jeweled weapon held in readiness before him prepared to deal with any savage animal that might make a sudden foray at the intruders who stalked through his lair.

Glancing to the girl at his side, Larry noticed that she was breathing heavily, and her face showed pale and white in the ebon blackness of the jungle. He slipped his arm about her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I've been thoughtless. You must be exhausted. Let's rest for a while."

They sat down cautiously at the base of a huge tree trunk. For a few moments they did not speak. They relaxed and regained the breath that the arduous trek through the jungle had taken from them. Then suddenly, Larry sat bolt upright and peered through the darkness.

"What's that?"

THE girl's eyes followed the direction indicated by his outstretched finger. And there flickering faintly through the network of leaves, was a fire. Betty's hand gripped Larry's arm tightly and she expressed in words the thought that trickled through his own mind.

"Have we doubled back on our trail?"

He shook his head dubiously and striking a match consulted his compass. It seemed impossible, yet he had often heard of lost men walking in a futile circle forever and ever, and being wholly unconscious of it.

"It can't be that," he said, and then a ray of hope flooded him. "Perhaps it's your father."

She was already on her feet.

Once again they resumed their march, this time with a faint light of hope spurring them forward.

The flickering light became stronger as they advanced. Suddenly, Larry squeezed Betty's hand warningly.

"Duck," he whispered.

The pair of them dropped abruptly to the jungle floor, just as two brown figures passed by them less than an arm's length away. They lay there, silent and apprehensive, staring through their leafy cover at the eerie scene before them.

At first, Larry thought that once again he had come upon the Rajah's safari. Yet it seemed impossible that the Indian Prince had doubled back on his trail and reached this spot. Then there was the enigmatic remark of the man with the scar, about meeting the Rajah at the temple.

If they were this close why did they not join forces now? Everyone seemed to be playing a grim game of hide and seek in the jungle. He turned as he felt Betty tug at his arm excitedly.

"Look!"

SHE pointed cautiously ahead and to the left. Larry's eyes followed her hand and as he strained his eyes against the glare of the fires, he saw a huddled figure lying on the fringe of the light cast by a small, almost deserted, blaze.

And as he stared the scene became clearer. He could see that it was a white man, and that he was bound. He turned inquiring eyes upon the girl.

"It's father," she said breathlessly.

Larry stared again at the spot, and as his aching eyes became more and more accustomed to the weird light, he realized that she was right.

He glanced about the camp carefully, hoping to see something of Singhi or the rest of the boys who had accompanied them. But he failed to recognize any of the Indians.

But—and the thought tortured his

weary brain—who had taken Somers prisoner? Whose camp was this? Certainly it was not that of the scar-fingered Hindu. It seemed incredible that it was that of the Rajah, who, he figured, by this time should be miles to the north east.

But, in any event, there was work to be done and little time to be lost in futile conjecture.

"Listen," he whispered to the girl. "Your father seems to be unguarded. Perhaps we can work our way around there under cover of the bush and release him."

"Let's try it anyway," she said, and Larry noticed the excited tremor in her tone.

CAREFULLY they made a wide detour, crawling slowly and silently through the jungle. It took them half an hour to travel a hundred yards. But by that time they had progressed to a point directly opposite the bound captives. There was a single native sitting on the ground by Somers, evidently a guard, whom they had not seen before.

Larry withdrew the priceless scimitar from underneath his coat, and prepared for a swift and sudden foray which would depend largely on its surprise and unexpectedness to be successful.

"You stay here," he told the girl. "And shoot to kill if you see them spot us. I'll get that native and release them."

She nodded, and Larry, flinging caution to the winds, stood up suddenly and charged down upon the fading camp fire. Less than three yards separated him from the guard when the latter looked up.

He came to his feet with an evil looking dirk in his hand to meet Larry's attack. With a swift, lithe gesture, Larry jerked the Damascus steel from its glittering scabbard

and struck at the man before him. Even in that tense second, the American noticed the other's stare of utter amazement as he saw the curved scimitar swing down upon him.

He made no move to protect himself. He made no effort to use his dirk. He simply stood in transfixed amazement watching the mysterious shining steel descend to take his very life from him. He fell backward, and lay prone and silent on the ground.

HASTILY, Larry bent down and slashed the bonds that held the captives. Somers sprang to his feet.

"Quick," yelled Larry. "Run for it."

At the sound of his voice, a number of natives standing some few feet away turned their heads. A shout of wild rage rang through the air, and as one man a half dozen of them turned and raced madly toward the escaping prisoners and their rescuer.

Larry found himself outdistancing Somers, whose muscles had become so cramped within his bonds that he could make but little progress. He slowed down and turned around. The Indians were almost upon them. He shouted to Betty, concealed in the brush, to open fire, and he once again lifted his scimitar to deal with this new threat.

Somers, unarmed as he was, took up a position at Larry's side.

The shrieking, yelling charges came down upon them, their lifted weapons gleaming in the kaleidoscopic light of the fires. Larry clenched his teeth and raised his own weapon, prepared to sell his own life as dearly as possible.

Then a strange thing happened.

The foremost native gave vent to a yell of alarm, and the charge stopped as abruptly as it had begun.

The attackers stopped dead in their tracks, and with startled, fear-stricken eyes stared dumbly at the weapon in Larry's hand.

One of them shouted something unintelligible. Then they all stood with bowed heads for a moment. A few of them slowly slunk away, and a moment later, the remainder still muttering in low tones, turned and made no effort to start the battle that they had rushed forward to begin.

Somers grabbed Larry's arm, and the little party disappeared quickly into the shelter of the sinuous growth behind them.

THEY spoke but little when Betty joined them and they set off with the object of putting some distance between them and the men that they had just fled before indulging in conversation. Eventually, Somers stopped.

"I'm dead tired," he said. "And we're far enough away now. Let's discuss this thing. We can rest, then hike back to where we started from and pick up our supplies. And I hope to God we meet Singhi and the boys. How did you come upon me, Larry, and where did you find Betty?"

Larry threw himself gratefully upon the ground and related his adventures of the day. When he finished, he saw Somers staring at him as though he disbelieved his story.

"You say that you met the Rajah and he treated you as a guest?"

Larry nodded. "Sure. I can't explain it, and I was suspicious enough to beat it when I got a chance, but I never saw such a change in a man."

"Well," said Somers slowly. "And who do you think you just rescued me from?"

Larry shook his head. "I've been

trying to figure that out for an hour," he said. "It seems that this jungle is filled with mysterious parties."

"You rescued me," said Somers deliberately, "from the Rajah. And he certainly never treated me as he treated you."

It was Larry's turn to stare at the other in surprise.

"Yes," went on Somers. "His men came upon me suddenly. I got separated shortly after we missed you. They trussed me up and left me without food and water. The man who impersonated you is with them. But how on earth he could have been where you saw him, then here, doesn't tie up at all. I don't understand it."

"Then," said Betty. "There's the matter of Larry's sword. Why did the natives regard it with such deference? Why did they stop their attack when they saw it?"

"I made out some of their conversation," said Somers. "The man who saw it first yelled something about a sacred scimitar. But I don't know what the devil he was talking about."

LARRY shrugged his shoulders. "It seems to be getting thicker and thicker," he remarked. "Instead of clearing up. However, let's get back to our base and set out for the temple. Evidently there are quite a few people bound in that direction, and something tells me that if we want to pull this deal off successfully we'd better be there first."

At the end of the long tramp back to the meeting place they had appointed, Singhi ran up and met them excitedly.

He had met with no misadventure and their boys and supplies were safe and sound. Larry breathed a sigh of relief at this turn of events, and heartily answered

Singhi's call to the meal which had already been prepared against their arrival.

However, before doing anything else, he carefully removed the jeweled scimitar from underneath his coat and planted it away in his knapsack.

CHAPTER IX

The Temple

C RIMSON dawn streaked the tropical sky, yet the jungle slept. It seemed that the only live thing that was awake was human. The sound of feet crashing noisily through the bracken swamp which surrounded Larry and his party, was the only sound within earshot.

They were mud-crusted and exhausted, yet a grim fighting hope held them to the forced march that they were making toward the north. Singhi had promised them that this morning would bring them to the temple for which they had risked their lives.

But, though they were now well within striking distance of their objective, they were no closer to the solution of the weird mystery that had sprung up about them. Larry, after spending many futile hours attempting to reach a conclusion which would satisfactorily explain everything, had finally taken Somers' advice.

"There's no use trying to figure it out now," the older man had said. "We're sure to find a clue to the whole thing at the temple. I'm not wasting my energy on it now."

And after running up many blind mental alleys, Larry had to be content with this, small solace that it was.

Suddenly the dimness which pervaded the jungle disappeared. The growth ceased and they found them-

selves in the clear, standing on the fringe of a vast plain of sand and stone. Singhi stood by Somers, and stretched out his arm.

"There," he announced gravely. "Temple!"

Breathless Larry looked into the distance. There, surmounted with the purple haze of the morning, a grim stone edifice rose into the heavens. Bleak and dour it was, yet to Larry it embodied the essence of all their efforts, the reward of all the hardship that they had suffered.

OVER the plain they marched. Their lagging footsteps were suddenly speeded up, now that they had entered upon the last lap of their arduous journey.

Abruptly Singhi stopped, and pointed to a thin spiral of smoke that rose from the rear of the temple into the mist of the morning.

Somers groaned. "My God, they've beaten us to it. We lose after all."

For a moment Larry was aware of a terrible dismay clutching at his heart. But a second later his inherent fighting instinct and fortitude asserted itself.

"We're not licked yet," he said grimly. "While there's life there's hope. Come on, let's keep on going."

His words seemed to encourage the others. Betty looked at him warmly and affectionately.

"Of course," she said. "We're not through yet, dad. But let's go ahead carefully."

Somers looked a trifle ashamed of his words of despair. Then he pulled himself together.

"You're right, Larry," he said. "Of course, we've still got a chance. Go ahead, Singhi, but try to keep out of their sight, whoever they are."

Singhi led over a more devious route now that they had seen the signs of a previous arrival. Yet

their pace did not decrease. They approached the temple from the east side, and as they drew nearer the smoke rose high and thickly from the other side of the structure.

However, Larry's advance reconnoitering showed them that whoever had beaten them there, seemed safely encamped upon the other side. No guards or sign of life had been observed in the line of their approach.

THEY came up under the temple walls with no mishap. Singhi told them that on the other side was a deep depression cut into the rock. It was there that the enemy, whoever he was, must have made his camp.

"Can we get into the temple from this side?" asked Larry.

Singhi nodded.

"Then let's go in now."

"Right," said Somers. "The rest of the boys can stay here with Betty."

Betty shook her head stubbornly. "No," she said. "I'm going with you. I've come this far and you're not going to leave me behind now."

Somers and Larry exchanged swift meaning glances. At last her father sighed and yielded.

"All right," he said. "I guess it's only fair that you should be in at the finish. Come on, Singhi."

They followed the native down a long flight of stone steps that had been cut into the natural rock of the exterior of the temple. At last they came to a subterranean tunnel. Somers took a flashlight from his pocket and followed close after their guide.

With an unerring sense of direction, the huge figure of Singhi led them through a veritable labyrinth of stone and rock. At last he came to a sudden stop.

"This is the entrance to the chamber that Sahib Weston found the treasure was in."

He stood aside revealing a short flight of steps which led still deeper into the bowels of the earth. Somers, flinging a yellow beam of illumination ahead from his flashlight, stepped down upon the age-old stone. Larry took Betty's arm and followed. Singhi brought up the rear.

ONCE again they came to level floor. Somers' searchlight played around the chamber. Larry noticed that they stood on a rock ledge, the actual room being about three feet below them.

The flashlight's beam played upon six teakwood portals that evidently opened into smaller rooms cut into the face of the rock.

"Look," said Somers. "One of them is open."

His flashlight ceased its restless journey and remained focussed on a single door, which stood yawning and open revealing a small empty closet behind it.

As he watched in wonder, Larry heard Betty give vent to a little scream and she gripped his arm tensely.

"Look," she cried. "A man!"

The three of them stared ahead and saw, lying prostrate at the foot of the open door the figure of a man. His right arm was stretched out above his head, and from his index finger to his wrist ran a white jagged scar!

A faint hissing sound echoed through the chamber. Somers started back and cried. "My God! Cobras!"

Two sinuous figures crawled sinisterly across the body of the dead man and stared venomously at the intruding beam of the flashlight.

Larry's brain raced. The man with the scar had beaten them here, and perhaps it was a fortunate thing for them that he had. He had paid with his life in his attempt upon the treasure of the lost temple.

"Look," cried Somers suddenly. "He must have come in that way."

His flashlight traveled across the room to a point directly opposite, revealing another entrance identical with the one they had just come through. Larry shuddered as he heard the cobra's hiss again sound through the room. He could feel Betty shudder as her hand rested on his arm.

"Come on," said Somers. "Let's get out of here. I'm beginning to understand part of this mystery anyway."

IN silence they retraced their steps and Larry felt somehow relieved when once again they came out into daylight. He felt that he had never appreciated the tropical sun so much as when he quitted that dark, dank hole of the cobras and the treasure.

Somers filled and lighted his pipe thoughtfully.

"Evidently," he said. "The man who captured you and Betty arrived here before the Rajah. While waiting he had a shot at the loot himself. Well, you see what happened."

"Wait," said Larry. "You told me that when my father died he said something about the sixth door. Well, there were exactly six doors down there."

Somers nodded. "I'm coming to that. It seems logical to believe that your father had discovered something which informed him which door hid the treasure. From what we have just seen it also seems logical to suppose that the remaining doors have been put there as a blind."

"In other words," said Betty, "you mean that while one door leads to the treasure, the others lead to death?"

"Exactly," said Somers. "There were cobras behind the door that the poor devil down there opened."

They had been placed there deliberately. Whoever did it, years and years ago, left food for them, and so arranged it that it would be an ideal breeding ground for them, so that he could safely figure that they would stay there through the ages."

"And," put in Larry, "you believe that some form of death exists behind four of those remaining closed doors?"

Somers nodded.

"All save one," he said. "And the man who knows which wins a fortune."

"But my father said the sixth door."

"True," said Somers. "But he died before he had time to elaborate. There are two entrances. Undoubtedly the right door is the sixth from one of them. But which one?"

Singhi, standing off to one side was staring over the vast plain with unblinking eyes. Suddenly he gave a shout of alarm.

"The Rajah! He comes!"

"Quick," exclaimed Somers. "We must hide. Round to the back of the temple. It's risky but we can't stand here and meet the Rajah now."

THEY turned and carefully picked their way over the sharp stones, huddling close to the temple walls in order to escape observation. Then, Somers seized Larry's arm excitedly.

"My God," he ejaculated. "Look."

Larry turned his head in the opposite direction of the approaching Rajah and stared in amazement.

"Am I mad," said Somers. "Has this thing turned my head? What do you see, Larry?"

Larry blinked and looked again. There, about a half a mile away, coming toward the temple from the rear was a large party of natives. Eight of them in the front of the procession bore a multi-colored litter, and seated thereon, clearly

distinct in that high visibility, sat the proud and haughty figure of the Rajah of Marapuana."

Larry, his brain reeling, turned his head and stared in the other direction. A facsimile of the thing he had just seen met his blinking gaze. From the front, another native carried seat approached and in it sat a second figure dressed in the royal robes of Marapuana!

"Either we're mad," said Larry in a low voice, "or there are two of them."

"If there are," said Somers swiftly, "we've got to decide which is genuine at once. Evidently, genuine or not, the one that captured you yesterday is the best bet. But how shall we choose?"

"Look!" said Betty excitedly. "With the one on the left is a white man. He must be the man who impersonated Larry. I vote we take our chances with the other."

"Right," yelled Larry. "That's a great idea. Come on, quickly."

THEY turned and ran toward the group approaching from the south. And a few minutes later they were bowing before the Indian who had treated Larry with such kindness a few days before.

The Rajah glanced at them, then looked across the plain to the approaching caravan. He nodded his head.

"You have chosen wisely," he said grimly. "Wisely indeed. I am pleased to set these eyes upon you once more, Sahib Somers."

Betty shot a triumphant look at Larry. Her hunch had worked. Apparently, they were now with a friend.

"Yes," the Rajah went on. "Over there you see my brother who has proved treacherous to his own blood. Death and duplicity follow in his wake."

He signalled to his servants.

"We will await his arrival here, and in the meantime, Sahib Somers, there is much to explain. The impostor who approaches is my brother. He has betrayed me. Before he was so foully murdered, Sahib Weston told me all the detail. On that night after he had left me, my twin brother who rules a realm far to the south, visited me. Suspecting nothing, I told him of the lost temple."

"It was then that he betrayed me. He filled my drink with a vicious drug which was calculated to drive me mad, then he turned my daughter and myself out of the palace. The drug had taken my senses from me and I knew not what I was doing. His guards prevented me from returning to the palace.

"However, my constitution was stronger than he had counted on. I conquered the drug within two days, then when my senses returned to me I set out for the temple with a faithful number of retainers that I gathered together in Rangoon."

"What about the scimitar?" asked Larry.

THAT," said the Rajah gravely, "is the symbol of the ruler of Marapuana. It is reputed to have once been the property of Brahma himself. That was the one thing that my brother failed to find. I had it too well hidden. My daughter brought it to me for she knew that I valued it more than life itself. Then, that night it was snatched from your hands by the Mullah who was in the pay of my brother."

"The man who followed me from America?" said Larry.

The Rajah nodded. "I had heard he was in America. My brother must have cabled shortly after you received the cable from Sahib Somers."

Somers then interrupted and told

his part of the story and, as the trio pieced their information together things became amazingly clear.

The twin brother of the Rajah, hearing of the lost temple, had cunningly laid plans to seize it for himself if it should be discovered. To this end he had visited the palace at Marapuana and had been fortunate enough to arrive the same night that Weston had returned with the news of his good luck.

He had drugged the real Rajah with a sinister Oriental poison and cast him out, believing that the insanity which the drug induced would be permanent. Then he had set out for the temple, with a renegade Englishman impersonating Larry, to fool Somers. He had intended to be off, taking Somers with him, before Larry could arrive. But there his plans had gone awry.

He made a rendezvous with the Mullah at the temple after sending him a messenger with a copy of the map, and while he did not know for certain, he hoped that the Mullah had been able to find the scimitar which he had been unable to discover for himself. In the meantime he had prepared a counterfeit of the real sword with which to impress the natives that he was the real Rajah.

CHAPTER X

The Doors of Death

SOMERS shuddered as he realized if the plan of the miscreant Rajah had worked he undoubtedly would have met the same fate as Hugh Weston.

By this time the approaching cortege had come up. It was a strange sight. Two men dressed in the robes of the Marapuana royal family approached each other across the rocky plain. Each stared haught-

ily at each other, until they came within earshot.

The Rajah spoke in a tone pregnant with contemptuous scorn.

"Well, my brother," he said. "It is enough. Much blood has stained your hands. For the sake of the blood tie, I forgive you. Return at once to your own realm."

"Nay," said the other. "I shall not, but I warn you to do the thing you suggest." He turned to one of his men. "Go, bring the men of the Mullah."

The man disappeared around the temple toward the place where the men who had been commanded by the dead man in the subterranean chamber were camped.

As the two Rajahs talked Larry studied their faces. The similarity between the two men was remarkable. One, perhaps, was a trifle thinner in the face; while the other had a cruel turn to his lips, but to a casual observer they were as alike as two peas.

Less than five minutes later a hundred men appeared around the corner of the temple. The impostor Rajah smiled ominously at the other.

"Here are men, my brother," he said in soft tones which were belied by the threat in his eyes, "here are men who will uphold their rightful ruler."

LARRY watched the crowd of natives as they wonderingly cast their eyes from one prince to the other, undecided as to whom was the lawful ruler.

"Yes," continued the man with the cruel mouth, "they shall recognize their rightful ruler, by the scimitar of the great Brahma himself. See, slaves!"

With a graceful gesture he drew back his coat and took from his belt a gleaming, jeweled scabbard. Larry's heart thumped as he realized

it was an exact replica of the weapon he carried beneath his own coat.

At the sight of this flaming symbol the natives bowed low for a moment in utter obeisance. Then, raising their heads they stared at the real Rajah and a threatening murmur swept their ranks.

But the Indian remained unperturbed. With a swift gesture he reached forth and snatched the glittering weapon, which seemed to have such a powerful effect on the natives, from the grasp of his brother.

"Look, you!" he cried in a terrible voice. "Is this the sword of the great prophet?"

HE swung it high over his head and brought it with a terrible crash down upon a sharp pointed rock. Then he turned the scabbard toward them.

"Look," he cried again in the same awful voice. "Does the scimitar of the prophet contain jewels which crumble when they are struck with granite? Do diamonds turn to dust?"

He turned the scimitar over in his hand revealing the crumbling jewels which had been crushed to paste upon the stone.

"Are these the jewels of the prophet that they turn to dust when put to the test? Is this blade, that rusts and snaps, worthy of the prophet?"

He whipped the blade from its sheath and with a downward blow snapped it across his knee.

"You see," he cried. "The blade breaks. Does such a poor thing rule men? It is an imitation, a blasphemy. Truly, the real sword of which this is such a weak counterfeit, is a great thing—a sword of the Gods, but this—this is a sword of Satan!"

The false Rajah sat there with fear in his eyes as he watched this drama, and the white man who had

said he was Larry Weston reflected his fear in his blanched face.

The natives had been impressed. They stood there silent and undecided. Finally, one of them spoke.

"But your Highness," he began deferentially. "All we seek is the truth. All we desire to know is which is our rightful prince. You have proved that this thing which you have shattered is no scimitar of the Gods, but where is the weapon of the prophet?"

LARRY glanced inquiringly at Somers, and the latter translated the native's words. A hesitant reply came to the Rajah's lips, then, in a single flashing second, Larry stood before the wondering mob.

He ripped open his knapsack, and withdrew the sparkling gem inlaid scimitar. He brandished it above his head. Somers taking in the situation at a glance, came up to Larry's side and addressed the mob in rapid Hindustani.

"Here," he shouted making himself heard above the murmur of amazement which swept over the natives. "Here is the rightful sword of the Gods. It is restored by the Sahib to its rightful owner!"

As the words left his lips, Larry turned to the Rajah, and bowing low tendered the sword to him. The Prince genuflected and taking the jeweled weapon, held it high and proudly above his head. The mob sank to their knees, and touched the rocky floor with their foreheads.

And when they rose, glances filled with hate and evil threats were cast at the man who had pretended to be their rightful Prince. An angry muttering passed over them like an ominous wind.

But the Rajah raised his hand, and the revengeful moment passed.

"No," he said. "Do not touch him.

I have better work for him. Bring my brother, and the white man who accompanied him to the temple chamber."

As they walked toward the temple, the Rajah smiled a trifle ruefully. "It must be done," he muttered to himself. "It is but justice."

The procession descended the flagstone steps that led to the underground maze. At the Rajah's orders, his brother and the renegade Englishman were carried thither by his men.

As they stood on the ledge that surrounded the chamber, Somers' flashlight picked out the twin hissing figures of the cobras that circled horribly around the prostrate figure on the floor. The Rajah regarded them coolly.

"Can you pick them off with a revolver?" he asked.

Larry nodded.

"I can try."

He took his thirty-eight from his pocket and squinting carefully down the barrel, pressed the trigger. The serpent reared up, hissing frightfully, then fell prone across the body of its last victim, its head severed from its writhing body.

Again Larry raised his weapon, and again the echoing reverberations of a report rang through the stone chamber. The second cobra joined its still squirming mate in its death throes.

THE Rajah turned calmly to the man who had betrayed him.

"You shall have your chance," he said. "Which was more than you gave me. Five of those doors are unopened. One of them holds the lost treasure of the ages, four of them contain death. You shall choose."

The Rajah's brother had by this time recovered the composure which

had left him a few moments ago when he had watched a dramatic fate snatch victory from his grasp and sent his deep laid plans to Limbo.

Proudly he shook himself free of the restraining hands of his captors.

"I am not afraid to die," he said haughtily. "I expected death. I accept the chance.

With a majestic bearing that Larry was forced to admire even while condemning the duplicity of the man, the false Rajah stepped down into the damp chamber and strode boldly across the room. For a single moment he stood hesitant before the closed portals as if he were considering upon which one he would gamble.

Then swiftly he chose. He put his heavily jeweled hand upon the door which stood closest to the opposite entrance from which Larry had first entered.

For a moment he fumbled with the lock. It creaked and groaned, thick with the rust of the ages. He jerked it violently. The teak wood quivered but still it did not open. He turned and smiled ironically over his shoulder.

LARRY felt Betty shiver beside him. The suspense in the dimly lighted chamber was terrific.

Then at last, the door gave way. Slowly it swung back on its hinges. Larry saw the Rajah's twin brother leap back swiftly. But swift as he was, it was not fast enough. Something glittered through the room. Something sprang like a steel snake from the interior of the closet which the door had opened upon.

Something plunged deep into the Hindu's breast. Blood dripped on the floor. Betty breathed heavily.

"What was it?" she gasped.

"A poisoned sword," answered her father. "Diabolically contrived so

that whoever opened the door would receive it either in the heart or the throat, depending upon his size."

"My God!" said Larry. "They certainly protected the treasure. He was tall enough to receive it in the heart, but it is so placed that a shorter man would have got it in the jugular."

The Rajah alone of them all seemed to be absolutely unmoved by the death of his brother. He turned with a relentless look in his eyes to the renegade Englishman who had impersonated Larry.

"No, you," he said.

The man cowered back against the wall.

"No," he whined. "For God's sake no."

"Take your chance," said the Rajah. "If not you will be killed in cold blood. We offer you a chance."

Desperately the man turned imploring eyes upon Larry.

"You're not going to let this native kill a white man, are you? You wouldn't let him do it—"

Remembering how gallantly the Hindu had met his doom, Larry felt ashamed that a member of his own race should show such cowardice.

"The Rajah must be obeyed," he said coldly. "Make your choice."

Trembling in every limb the white man rose to his feet and approached the edge of the ledge above the chamber. There he hesitated and cast one last imploring gaze back at his captors, but the look that he saw in their eyes gave him little encouragement.

Then, as men will do when on the brink of inevitable death, he found a sort of desperate courage. With an obvious physical effort he pulled himself together.

His muscles were tense and stiff as he took the step down into the chamber. His eyes searched wildly around the room, carefully scanning

all the doors as if some tell-tale outside clue would tell him which contained death and which the jewels of the lost temple.

FINALLY he selected one. He walked shakily toward the sixth door from the far entrance. Larry nudged Somers.

"That's the sixth door from the far side," he said. "If it's not right, I'll take a chance. I'll take the sixth from this side."

Somers nodded but said nothing. All the spectators' eyes were riveted to the nervous figure in the circular chamber below them.

He placed his hand on the lock and turned the knob. He pulled with all his fast waning strength at the portal. Like the former door, it did not move at first. Then as he gave a sudden convulsive jerk, the door flew open.

Then his tense nerves gave way. He uttered a terrible shriek and fell prone on the stone flagging of the floor. Larry stood with his thirty-eight cocked ready to fire at whatever might emerge from the small room that the door had kept sealed for so long.

They all waited for a full minute in a nervous tension, wondering what sinister and mysterious thing had slain the Englishman. Nothing happened. Nothing was seen. There was no sign of life in the lower part of the chamber.

"I'll take a look," said Larry, and before anyone could stop him he had vaulted lightly to the damp floor below. Cautiously he approached the prostrate form across the room. His eyes were glued to the open door.

Seeing nothing, he bent over the

inert figure of the white man. After a cursory examination he sighed with relief and straightened up.

"It's all right," he said. "There's nothing here. He probably went out of heart failure, he was so scared. There's not a mark on him,"

In a moment he was joined by Somers, and together they entered the vault. Excitedly they pawed over the rotted silk fabrics which was piled up before them and suddenly Somers gave a shout which echoed throughout the chamber.

"I've found it! Here it is!"

He jerked away a handful of the disintegrated material and played his flashlight on the most brilliant thing that Larry Weston had even seen.

A king's ransom in gems sparkled and glittered, sending its magical rays through the sinister chamber, sending its blinding light to every dim corner of the room.

Two natives assisted the Rajah into the sunken room, and a moment later he took command, efficiently giving orders to his men who slowly removed the treasure.

"Well," said Somers, his arm flung in friendly fashion about Larry's shoulder, "we've done it, and—" Here his eyes caught the prone figure of the Rajah's brother which lay upon the floor at their feet. "I guess you've avenged your father's death, son."

Larry nodded, his eyes moist with tears as he thought of his father's murder. But the sorrow that assailed him did not last long. It vanished at the same time that he took Betty in his arms and led her from the sinister temple into the light of the clean fresh sun.

Watch for More Stories by Jack D'Arcy

The Devil Tree



*A Pulse-Stirring Jungle Story of the Little Men of
Madagascar and A Horrifying Plant That
Feeds on Human Flesh*

By JACK De WITT

Author of "Grey Gold," etc.

SERGEANT GIBSON!"

The man in the moored canoe was stealthily raising a rifle to his shoulder when the call came from the deep jungle green which bordered the river like a wall.

In mid-stream of the sluggish river there was an audible "plop," and two objects which would have appeared to the uninitiated like gnarled knobs on a log, disappeared in a swirl of reddish-brown water.

Sergeant Gregory Gibson cursed

the man who was still hidden in the foliage on the bank.

In French he shouted, "You fool! Lamar, I was just about to pop old gray eye himself."

Out from the jungle green, running on a tiny pathway which ended at the beached prow of the dugout canoe, there burst a man whose flushed face and panting breath told Gibson instantly that something more important was afoot than pot-shooting crocodiles from a canoe at

the river bank. Even though the particular crocodile had been singled out days before by a light-colored eye socket as a man eater which had dragged a Malagasy black to his doom.

"Gray eye can wait," panted the newcomer. "The professor's been—been caught by th'—th'—the little men."

SERGEANT GREG GIBSON of the French Foreign Legion was out of the canoe in a bound and standing beside the other on the bank.

"How do you know?" he demanded.

And even as he asked the question there shot into his mind plans for pushing at once into the hilly Madagascar wilds, back from the river.

Jacques Lamar caught his breath with a gulp and promptly shattered the first plan which the rapid-thinking sergeant had evolved.

"Andrian got back," he said quickly. "He bawled out to me that the little men had got the professor. Then the rest of our party quietly melted into the bush."

"Deserted!" gasped the sergeant.

"*Oui, mon American.*" The Frenchman was still excited but managed to turn on his famous smile. "Deserted, of a truth; but they are not soldiers. Only Andrian is the soldier."

The sergeant was striding along the pathway from the river before his companion finished speaking. At a clearing in which a group of palm thatched huts stood on their poles like strange jungle creatures on stilts, Gibson shouted the one word, "Andy!"

A jet black Malagasy stuck his head out of the tiny doorway of the nearest stilted hut and looked, very sadly, down at the sergeant.

"The white doctor who looks at the plants—" began the black.

"I know," interrupted the American, speaking in Malagasy. "Are you leaving with the rest of these louse-ridden sons of the forest dog, or are you going to show us where the professor was caught?"

With the lithe grace peculiar to the bushman, Andrian slipped down the pole ladder and stood with straightened back and uplifted chin before the sergeant.

"I, Andrianjafinsimitovianitra, direct descendant of Queen Ranavalona the first, never desert a friend," said the black firmly. "The forest dogs who fled and who fear the little men and the devil tree are not of the great French army."

Sergeant Gibson sighed with relief when he heard the colonial soldier pronounce his name in full and make reference to his royal lineage.

ANDY on his dignity was a man to be relied upon to go anywhere and to do anything that his sergeant commanded.

"It's up to us, then," Gibson told his companions. "Those poor superstitious blacks with their belief in devil trees and ghosts can't be blamed for deserting us when they heard the news—"

"The Devil Tree is more than a belief, Sergeant," interrupted the descendant of Madagascar royalty.

"So I've heard," replied Gibson. "But seeing's believin'. I'll see one and then tell about it. Can we leave at once, Andy? How far were you out when the professor got caught?"

"Two days, white sergeant," replied the Malagasy respectfully. "The professor go along ahead with the five boys. I come behind carrying the little case with the leaves and plants. Suddenly the woods are alive with little men."

THE Malagasy paused and a far-away look came into his eyes. Gibson noticed that the man shuddered and the sergeant felt a greater respect for this black who was trying so hard to stifle the superstitious fears that had sent a dozen stalwart blacks scurrying into the bush at the words, "little men."

"The air swarms with little men," Andrian continued. "I drop behind the bushes. I see the five men killed with arrows and spears. I see the white doctor who looks at the plants, buried under many of the little men. I see that they do not harm him. I come away."

"You had warned him, Andy?" asked the American.

Andrian looked hurt. "It was my duty, Sergeant," he replied. "The day before, I tell the white doctor that we must be near the land of the little men and that it was dangerous."

"And what did he say?" persisted Gibson.

"He say keep my fears quiet from others, but we must go on. He must see the tree."

"What tree?"

"Devil tree," Andrian replied in a tone of deadly finality.

"Then he believed it, too?"

Gibson turned to the Frenchman who had been busy with rifle and cartridge belts, running around in bubbling haste, gathering what would be needed for the journey.

"Hear what he said, Jacques?" asked the sergeant. "Says the professor deliberately steered him into the little men's country and got himself caught and five men killed."

"And that," replied Jacques Lamar quietly, "comes of wet nursing a *sacre* madman in the jungles while he goes madder looking for some damned plants that no one on earth is interested in."

"True," agreed the American. "But that don't get us anywhere. We gotta keep on wet nursing the old man or go back to Antanarivo and make some trumped-up report about what we think the pigmy blacks did to him."

"Antanarivo," breathed Andrian, who had followed the conversation but understood only the one word.

Sergeant Gibson turned to the Malagasy.

"If you want to stay here, Andy, I know how you feel," he said. "The others will be back to the camp as soon as they know that they're not going to be taken into the hills. Antanariva looks good to you. No sense in committing suicide if you don't have to. You've met the little men once. Wait here for a month and if Lamar and I don't come back, go down the river and make the report. Is it a go?"

"Andrianjafinsimit—" began the black.

"Andy goes along," interrupted Gibson, "I know. Then we start at daylight. Three against ten thousand for all we know, and all because a professor of botany got himself in a jam by blind-fool wandering into dangerous country."

"To pick a few flowers," added Lamar, also speaking in Malagasy.

"To see the Devil Tree," breathed Andrian and looked hurt when the American emitted a disgusted snort and climbed rapidly up the pole ladder into the hut which he shared with his fellow Legionnaire.

II

SERGEANT GIBSON had not taken three strides from the temporary camp site before Andrian was at his side.

"You go not alone," said Andrian. "Your 'ody' no good against the snakes."

Gibson knew that Andrian was thinking not of the "ody," the little carven god that would ward off snakes, but of the little men and the Devil Tree. But he made no comment.

Thirty minutes after the departure of his friends, Jacques Lamar stirred from beside the hardwood trunk which had supported his back so comfortably, and was about to replenish the cooking fire when he heard a stir in the underbrush near the camp.

The forest that the trio had pushed through for the last two days was by no means as dense as the liana hung jungles of the river sides, but the underbrush was heavy beyond the small camp clearing and Lamar peered into the thickets for sign of beast or bird that had stirred the leaves.

He saw nothing and was bending over the fire again when he heard the pad of bare feet and the rustling of bodies through the brush.

Lamar straightened and looked into the tiny, evil eyes of a naked black who stood barely five feet high. The savage menaced the soldier with an assegai whose crude iron tip was within a foot of Lamar's chest.

BEHIND the little man there sprang from the underbrush a score of similar beings. All stared at the white man with tiny sunken eyes that glinted in the half light of the jungle clearing like small lights set in charcoal.

Jacques Lamar was no coward. He saw the fabled little men of the Madagascar wilds suddenly become a reality. He thought of the dreaded Devil Tree which the same fables provided for the little men to worship, and he made a headlong dive for the bivouac and his rifle.

Under ordinary circumstances the

dive would have been one of suicide. But the Kodos of Madagascar evidently were not in a killing mood that day.

Lamar was hurled to the ground by what seemed to him to be a thousand arms, all steel strong and tough as jungle lianas, which entwined themselves about his legs, caught at his arms, gripped his clothing and even fastened their talon-like appendages into his hair.

As the Kodos struggled with him they emitted strange animal-like grunts which seemed to Lamar to be their sole method of communicating with each other.

In less than two minutes after his first mad dash for a weapon, Lamar was trussed knees to chin with vine ropes and was carried by a full half dozen of the Kodos to a short distance from the camp where he was hidden in a clump of bushes with two restless pigmies menacing him with their spears.

The Frenchman heard his captors rustling about the camp, then silently they returned to the underbrush around him and he saw them dropping one by one out of sight.

AT a sign from one who seemed to be their leader and whose face was smeared with clay to a ghastly yellow, one of the Kodo guards stuffed a twisted rope of dried grass into Lamar's mouth effectively gagging him.

Sergeant Gibson and Andrian walked blindly into the ambush. At least the American walked blindly. Andrian had stooped to examine a bush where a bruised leaf had caught his eye, when the rush came.

The Malagasy was carrying the shot gun. Gibson had in his hands two brace of grouse-like birds which he had intended for the camp breakfast.

Suddenly the underbrush about the

hunters became alive with tiny naked forms which bristled with blow guns, arrows and assegais. Gibson dropped his game and lashed out with his fists at the same time that he heard the double explosion of the shotgun behind him.

The shots were followed by screams of pain and grunts of surprise from the group of Kodos which had singled Andrian out for attack. As the naked forms wavered or fell, Andrian dashed for the gap thus made, but a dozen spears were hurled through his body and as many blow darts, each one murderously poisoned, found billets in his vitals.

Gibson saw the valiant Malagasy fall and redoubled his efforts to fight his way from the swarm of ant-like human beings which milled about and threatened to engulf him.

His bare fists struck resounding blows on naked, immature chests. Bones cracked as his knuckles struck against the jaws of his adversaries. But no assegai was plunged into his waiting chest. No poisoned dart or arrow pierced his straining abdomen.

Still fighting, but buried in a pile of naked, stinking bodies, with sweating, rubber-like thighs pressed against his face, Gibson was overpowered and trussed as had been the Frenchman a scant hour before.

THEN, still ringing him with their spears, the little men of Madagascar allowed him to breathe again and a few moments later warily arranged his bonds so that he could stand erect, although still hobbled and with his hands lashed tight behind him.

Lamar was brought to his side, similarly bound, and the American greeted the Frenchman with a rueful smile.

Lamar, however, grinned back in his habitual care-free fashion. "They

swarm like bees," he commented.

"And sting like wasps," replied Gibson, nodding his head towards the pitiful body of the Malagasy prince which lay half hidden in the underbrush.

III

THAT night the Kodos kept their prisoners under careful guard and by the time the first rays of dawn pierced the matted forest roof, the white men were shown by grunts and signs that they were to march, tied neck to neck with a tough vine halter.

The Kodos left the wooded hillside and plunged into a grassy valley where a stream wound its way from other hills at the valley's head. Skirting the fringe of tangled bush at the stream side, the pigmies forced their prisoners along until the creek-side jungle thinned out, whereupon they turned abruptly to the left and followed the stream more closely.

That night they camped near the stream and the Legionnaires were given food and water.

It was at noon the next day before another halt was called. The creek had provided a natural highway for the blacks to follow, but the bush had grown more dense in the last few hours. Suddenly the party plunged from a wall of pale green ferns into a barren stretch of river bank probably three hundred yards in length.

Here they halted and the Kodos seemed strangely agitated. They made signs to each other and grunted in their primitive language in a manner that suggested to the American and his fellow prisoner that they were praying to their gods.

It was Lamar who first sensed the reason for their agitation. Not a hundred yards from him he saw a

peculiar plant probably ten feet high, growing a dozen paces back from the creek in the center of the barren strip of ground.

The trunk of the tree resembled in shape the fruit of a pineapple, but smooth. From the peak of the cone, ten feet from the ground, giant leaves drooped downwards until they touched the earth. From the cone top, waving eerily upwards although there was no breeze, were four pistils probably six feet long. Below these pistils hairy green tendrils grew out horizontally from the trunk top, and these too waved and writhed like things alive.

Farther along the creek bank, probably two hundred yards from its sister tree, grew another of the sinister plants.

"*Le Diable*," murmured Lamar.

Gibson, who had been following with his eyes a tiny pathway which skirted the barren creek-side strip and disappeared in the dark wall of the jungle, started suddenly and followed the Frenchman's stare.

"The Devil Tree, by God!" he said.

In spite of himself Gibson felt his knees shake and his throat become dry. There before him was another reality which he had believed, during the five years of his service for the French in Madagascar, to be a fable.

HE had heard horrible tales told by natives of the cruelty of the inland Kodos and their frightful rites at the Devil Trees. But he had summed up the stories as so much folk lore, handed down no doubt from the day thousands of years before when the greatest of all earthly cataclysms tore Madagascar from the African mainland and formed the Mozambique channel, the deepest gash in the earth.

A grunt at his side caused the

American to start walking again. The two prisoners were led along the trail which turned abruptly into the forest and penetrated like a cavern into a narrow strip of jungle where lianas and hardwoods, tree-ferns and ground scrub had been hacked away.

Beyond the jungle strip the path wound upwards until at last on the bare side of a hill, in a clearing that was fringed with upland palms, they came upon the village of the Kodos.

Small men and smaller women poured from caves in the limestone hillside like scrawny rats startled from their burrows.

They crowded around the prisoners and the American shuddered and recoiled from the touch of their stinking, filthy bodies.

Lamar, however, greeted the grunting, squealing horde with a smile that had been undimmed by the enforced march and the hardship of the creekside trail.

"Cute little bunch?" commented the Frenchman.

"Cute, hell!" replied Gibson. "Cute like the little vermin ridden, scaly rats. But look, Frenchy! Look coming down the hill!"

LAMAR followed his sergeant's gaze to the hillside. There, threading his way along the tortuous pathways between the caves, walked a grey bearded, white man, towering above a group of curious pigmies who dogged his heels and walked almost backwards in front of him, their eyes fixed upon him as if hypnotized.

"Professor Mernier!" gasped the American.

"The man we came to save seems to have saved himself," smiled Jacques Lamar.

"Why did you come?" The professor's first words merely added to

the shock of his appearance, seemingly at perfect ease among the Kodos.

The American was first to speak. "We came to see if we could effect a rescue, *mon* Professor," he said. "It was our assigned duty when we left the regiment to escort you and bring you safely back."

Like most men of his age and activity, Professor Mernier plainly resented the implication that he needed to be taken care of.

"You came to rescue me from a situation into which I purposely ventured," he snapped. "And were yourselves made prisoners." He paused a moment and looked at the throng of Kodos, "And as near as I can judge, have been chosen as sacrifices to the trees tomorrow, which happens to be the beginning of the tribe's annual festival."

"Festival?" asked Lamar. "You mean they will eat us?"

"No, but the tree undoubtedly will," replied Professor Mernier. "I allowed these people to capture me, knowing that at this season they desire above all things a white captive or a captive of larger stature than their own to sacrifice to their tree god. Once caught it was merely simple psychology and sleight of hand that convinced them that I am a greater god even than their tree. They suffer me to remain. I have the opportunity that I have wasted a lifetime seeking in Africa and in Madagascar."

"To study the Devil Tree," suggested the American.

"Exactly, and I intend to complete the study." The professor walked away without another word.

THE prisoners were closeted together in one of the limestone caves with six spear-armed guards and a hundred curious dwarfs blocking the entrance.

That night the white men were given a concoction which Lamar smilingly assured his companion consisted of the beaten bodies of cicadas and locusts boiled with fish from the river.

Gibson believed him and ate nothing. But when the Kodo guards saw that he would not eat and sought again to lash his hands behind his back, Gibson strained his muscles and flexed his wrists against the tough vine rope.

After an hour of struggling to slip the bonds from his wrists in the smelly darkness of the cave, Gibson finally gave it up. A word from Lamar assured him that the Frenchman had tried the same ruse—and failed.

IV

KODOS were swarming from the hillside caves and thronging the pathway through the jungle strip towards the river.

Gibson and Lamar, ordered from their prison, looked in vain for Professor Mernier as they were led from the village clearing.

Grunts of the Kodos had changed to a sort of murmuring chant. The little men looked at the prisoners with a new and maniacal light in their eyes.

The annual festivities at the Devil Tree were about to begin.

Still side by side, the prisoners were taken to within twenty yards of the first of the weird plants that they had seen when they first burst from the jungle the day before.

"I wonder what they'll do first?" murmured Gibson as he stood and glared with awed wonder at the mysterious shrub whose ever-waving pistils looked like pale and sinister snakes, reared on their tails and feeling into the misty morning air for prey.

"We'd ask the professor if we could see him," Lamar replied, and Gibson noticed that his habitual smile had faded. "He seems to know all about this stuff."

The prisoners had not long to wait to learn what the Kodos would do. The action of the next few minutes moved as swiftly as a three ring circus at the last performance with a thunder storm approaching.

The chanting of the Kodos grew louder. From behind the American and his companion, terrified, half-frenzied screams were heard.

Gibson turned quickly. He saw a tiny Kodo woman, whose shriveled body and seamed face told him she was of great age, being driven forward by spearman. The woman turned no glances to the right and left as she screamed and moved hesitatingly forward, but her eyes were fixed on the dead green leaves of the awful tree whose maw she was destined to feed.

Gibson and his companion watched with gasping breath.

THE woman was forced to within ten feet of the Devil Tree and then with a sudden rush, as if her reticence to approach was suddenly cast aside and she was desirous of ending the gruesome rites as quickly as possible, she ran to the tree, clutched its trunk and climbed rapidly upwards.

A pitiful, naked little figure, she stood on what appeared to the watchers to be the edge of a white, bowl-like growth at the trunk top.

Above her the waving pistils became more agitated. At her feet the hairy tendrils rustled upwards. The giant leaves stirred from where they joined the trunk beneath the bowl, down to the heavy horn-like tip on the ground.

"Tisk! Tisk!" "Drink! Drink!" yelled the multitude of Kodos.

The white men could see the muscles of her thighs and back bunched as though she would leap to the ground. She suddenly stooped and the watchers saw her scoop something from the bowl-like growth at her feet and press her cupped hands to her mouth.

She turned and faced the crowd. Utter terror was written in every feature of her strained little face. Her eyes bulged, a trickly, yellow substance oozed from the corners of her mouth and ran down her pitiful shrunken body.

Swiftly the almost colorless pistils above her twisted downwards, writhing like live things, fastening her about the waist, pinning her straining arms to her sides. From below there rose the hairy pale-green tendrils until they almost hid the doomed woman from the gaze of the watching white men and the now demoniacally yelling Kodos, on the ground.

At last, with awful slowness, the giant leaves moved upwards. Gibson and Lamar saw that the concave under sides of the heavy leaves, the sides that were on top when the leaves were quiet and until the upward movement was completed, were fitted with hooked thorns.

Slowly, relentlessly, the leaves closed about the already dead woman in her prison of tendrils and snake-like pistils. Slowly the leaves came together and shut out the last sight of the pitiful corpse. Then, remorselessly, with the deadly certainty of a thumb screw, the leaves tightened and could be seen at their base jerking inch by inch, crushing within them the pulped mass that was the life food of the murder tree.

FROM between the edges of the folding leaves there trickled down the trunk the same treacly,

yellowish fluid that the doomed woman had scooped from the bowl. Much of it was stained now and horrible to behold.

But the Kodos dashed forward and with insane yells and squeals pressed their faces against the trunk of the awful tree and licked and drank of the viscid flow.

Then began the wildest orgy, the most bestial exhibition that the two soldiers had ever seen in the years of their service for the Legion in Morocco, the Sudan, Indo-China and Madagascar.

Gibson looked wildly about him for a chance to escape, bound and hobbled as he was. But the drunken guards hemmed him closer with their spears and their pig-like eyes glinted madly into his.

Jacques Lamar was completely unnerved at last. His grin had faded. His lips were tightened in a white straight line.

"*Pour le bon Dieu*," he prayed. "Is there no way out?"

"Try to hold yourself, Frenchy," Gibson warned him. "These guards'd just as soon rip out our stomachs as not so they can get into that mess. If the professor shows up, there may be a chance—"

"He'd sacrifice us to see how the tree works," grimly muttered Lamar.

"There's only one more tree," Gibson told him. "From what I've heard it takes them ten days to open up again. In ten days—"

"One more tree means one of us," cut in Lamar.

AND the truth of the Frenchman's observation was borne upon the prisoners within an hour, when the intoxicant seemed to wear from their guards and the dreadful orgy on the plain abated.

The prisoners were ordered by signs and spear thrusts to move. They were herded and forced across

the barren riverside strip towards the other tree.

It was Lamar who was chosen for the second sacrifice. Immediately the Kodos made it known to the prisoners that the Frenchman was expected to approach the tree, Gibson intervened.

Bound though he was, he hurled one of the Kodo guards aside with a thrust of his thigh. He stepped before Lamar and shouted quickly, "I have an idea—a plan. It may work. Let me take the chance."

The Frenchman objected and sought to advance, but the Kodos, seeing quickly what was afoot, ringed him with their spears and held him, impotent, bound and muttering his hate into every evil face around him.

Sergeant Gregory Gibson of the French Foreign Legion had no plan. He had a great respect for the French corporal who had been assigned with him to guard the professor whom he now considered to be as mad as the Kodos who swarmed about him.

Then there was his reason for joining the Legion which he had almost divulged to his friend a few days—or was it months—before. A reason which only himself and a certain American banker could now ever know. By taking the Frenchman's place in the Devil Tree, Gibson knew he would be giving Jacques Lamar a respite of at least ten days, and in ten days anything may happen.

He edged between the nearest two of the giant down-stretched leaves and stood at the trunk while a Kodo spearsman approached and cut the vines about his wrists from behind. Wildly, Gibson glared about him. On every side he looked into a crowd of demoniac faces. Everywhere bristled the spears which awaited him if he left the tree.

The American placed his hands on the trunk and found it smooth to the touch and hard as iron. He looked at the nearest sleeping leaf and saw its rows of hooked thorns, then he began to climb.

Once more a human sacrifice stood on the top of the Devil Tree's trunk. Once more the Kodos set up their frenzied cry of "Drink! Drink!"

And once more the intended sacrifice trembled beneath the waving, pale white pistils and stooped to the cup.

Once he glanced down at the upturned faces of the maddened horde. He waved a shaking hand to Lamar who still struggled feebly in the grip of a dozen Kodos.

Then he cupped his hand to receive the honey-like substance from the bowl. And found it empty.

The waving pistils bent and swayed. The hairy, pale green mat-like maw which should now rise to encompass him, remained restless but apparently unable to perform its mechanical act of cannibalism.

FROM the giant leaves, sloping to the ground from his feet, there came no movement.

"Pretend to drink."

The command came in the high pitched tones of Professor Henri Mernier.

Gibson plunged his hands into the great white bowl and brought them up, cupped. He stood erect, screamed wildly to the natives and pressed his cupped hands to his mouth.

"Now stand there a minute and then descend."

Again the command. This time Gibson looked down and saw the bloodless face of the professor.

But the Kodos had become silent as they watched their terrible tree. They fell back in awe as nothing happened, grunting to each other.

Minutes passed. Gibson, actually holding one of the almost transparent pistils for support, watched until he was sure the Kodos were sufficiently impressed, then prepared to descend.

"What's the answer?"

THE three words came tremulously from the American as he faced the professor on the ground. Lamar, unnerved, shaking from head to foot, stood and glared in open-mouthed wonder at the professor.

"I doctored the tree while the other rite was in progress," said the professor calmly. "It merely proves the vegetable physiology I worked out on the little flycatcher plants and the larger, rodent devouring types in Africa. Disturbance of the fluid in the cup causes the tree to act. I moved the fluid from the cup simply by pushing a spear into it from below. While the orgy was in progress at the other tree, this one closed itself, found no prey within its leaves and, as I had hoped, reopened again."

"And because the tree didn't work on me I'm as much a god to the little men as you are," suggested Gibson.

"Not quite as much," amended the professor. "But you will be free to depart and will be shown the way to within a day or two of your camp. At Antanarivo you will report to your command and will tell my good friend Captain Gautier that my work has just begun among the little men of Madagascar."

"And you?"

"I shall remain with my friends The Kodos who know much about the flora of their country that I must learn."

"Me," remarked Lamar, "I've learned all I want to learn. Professor, you can have it all."

Guarded by Fire!



*A Chance Meeting in Paris Leads Jack Nelson
Into Exciting Intrigue and Adventure in
Soviet Russia*

A Complete Novelette

By MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON

Author of "The Corral of Death," "Wings of the Devil," etc.

CHAPTER I

NATURALLY, there was not the slightest suspicion in his mind, when he entered that little Russian restaurant in the Rue Tabor, that he would walk out of there again with his whole life altered in intensity and tone. One doesn't foresee those things, any more

than Jack Nelson did on this drizzly Paris evening.

A desire for a little Russian cheer led his aimless footsteps into the place, which was at first a blur of barbaric scarlet and gold, of earnest talk and laughter, of much cigarette smoke and the tinkle and throb of a balalaika orchestra.

It was only when he was seated

and looked about him that the image of her impinged upon his consciousness, driving out every other sensation. It was as though the sight of her struck some chord in his being that drowned out all other things so that her great dark eyes seemed to expand until they filled the entire room and he had the sensation of swimming towards a goal, which was her.

Slim and dark she was, yet abundantly curved and the glory of the line of her shoulder and chin and delicately carved lips and nostrils was enough to have set a poet singing.

Never had he seen such beauty and grace and fire. It was only when she came towards him and stood above him that he realized that she was the waitress at his table. There was constraint between them and awkwardness as he tried to select things from the menu and it was with a leap of his heart that he noted that she turned away from his table with a faint hesitancy.

And then she flashed back at him a glance that made his heart miss a beat, a glance that held in it warmth and friendliness and something else that set his pulses to pounding.

IT was then, for the first time, that he saw the fat man sitting alone at a side table. This fellow beckoned to her with a large fleshy hand, gleaming with diamonds. She halted, bent her head to listen to what he was saying and then straightened up, shaking her head wearily and then passed on to the kitchen, disappearing from view behind the swinging doors.

As Jack Nelson watched the stout man he saw the fellow beckon to the head waiter who came up deferentially. There was a low-voiced conversation for a moment at the end of which the head waiter in turn

disappeared behind the folding doors of the kitchen.

CURIOUS as to what this might portend, Jack watched. In another few minutes his eyes were rewarded by the sight of the girl.

But this time she was attired for the street in a plain dark dress and close-fitting hat. Jack rose as she came towards him. She passed by the stout man with her head held high.

As she went out of the door she looked back at Jack with something of regret and sorrow in her eyes. In a few seconds he had paid his account and followed her.

Calling to her as he saw that she was starting off on foot through the rain, she stopped and came back slowly, a strange look in her eyes.

There was a constraint about her and a certain wariness as though she had long been skilled in fighting off the advances of roving men.

But Jack's offer of assistance was so frank and friendly that she wavered and before he was through talking she had acceded to his request to dine with him at another restaurant.

They had scarcely seated themselves at the table when Jack's eyes rested on the doorway and his face grew stern.

"There is your fat friend," he growled; "shall I go over and smack him?" The girl paled at sight of the intruder and then shook her head vigorously.

"No, no," she said, "he is not *too* bad. He is not what you think. It is only that he wishes me to enter into a business deal with him which I do not want. But he is terribly annoying—tonight is the fourth time he has had me discharged from my position."

Jack, listening to her and hearing the tones of her voice was certain

now that he had no ordinary Russian emigre to deal with. They talked together, those two, and Jack found her mind marvelously stimulating as they swung from art to literature and from literature to philosophy and back again while the fat man stared at them.

TOO soon the evening ended and she insisted on departing alone, promising, however, to meet him at a small café near the Louvre the day following. He turned from placing her in the taxi to find the fat man standing behind him signaling for another car.

"Just a moment, my friend." Jack laid a restraining hand on his arm. It was a powerful hand, steel sinewed, and the stout man winced. He started to protest, but there was something in the steady, unflinching stare of Nelson, who towered above him, that made him change his mind.

"You are a friend of her Highness?" asked the stout man. Jack noted the use of the title, but gave no sign that it surprised him.

"Yes, I am. And it is not my idea to have her annoyed," he stated calmly.

"But, Monsieur, you do not understand. It is that I try to aid her," cried the stout man.

"Yes?" returned Jack skeptically. "I can just about reason out the kind of aid you would give!"

The stout man looked hurt and injured, then, taking Jack's arm, he said: "Come, we will discuss the matter. Perhaps, if you are a friend of her Highness, you will aid me to help her."

Curious, Jack allowed himself to be led to a table and ordered a whiskey and soda while he waited for the stout man opposite him to reveal what it was all about.

"You have known her Highness a long time?" asked the stout man.

"Yes," returned Jack equably, reasoning that so much had happened to him since first seeing her that it really amounted to a long time.

"*Bon!*" nodded the stout Russian, for Russian he was, "and perhaps you also knew her father, Prince Palitzine?"

Jack had played a great deal of poker in his life. His face gave no clue to his feelings as the name struck a familiar chord of memory. Palitzine, as he remembered, was one of the oldest and most aristocratic of the Russian noble names. He remembered that the Prince was a patron of the arts and a great collector and it was reputed that his family had lost millions in the Bolshevik revolution.

"No," he said, "I did not know Prince Palitzine."

"But you probably have heard of his wonderful collection of jewels?" Another chord of memory responded in Jack's mind and he recalled having heard of that collection, said to be one of the finest in the world.

"Yes," he nodded.

"Then you probably also know that the famous collection was never found by the Bolsheviks?" Jack did not know this, but he looked wise and said nothing.

"It has been a great mystery," went on the stout man, "at the time of the Prince's capture by the Bolsheviks search was made for the jewels. I believe that the Prince was—ah—that pressure was used on the Prince to make him divulge their hiding place." Jack smiled grimly, knowing just about what sort of "pressure" was brought to bear, and wondering under what sort of torture the poor devil of a prince died, his lips sealed to the last.

YES, it was very sad, he suffered greatly without revealing his secret," went on the stout man, as

though reading his thoughts, "*but* his bravery was due to the fact that he wished the collection to be preserved for his only child, her Highness, the Princess Marie. And, as you know, her Highness is living in extreme poverty in Paris, working at menial tasks.

"Now it is known that the Prince sent word to Princess Marie, telling her of the hiding place of the treasure, which is popularly supposed to be somewhere at the manor house of his immense estates. These estates are made now into a collective farm by the Soviets and they have sought long and unsuccessfully for the treasure, which is well over forty million francs in value."

THE Russian was talking with hands and eyebrows as well as tongue, flinging out his arms dramatically as he spoke.

"Yes," agreed Jack, "but where do you come in on this?"

"Ah!" exclaimed the stout man, and drew forth his card case, "I am business man in here in Paris," and he handed over a card which read "Boris Brodsky, Wholesaler in Russian caviar, furs, leathers, etc." giving his office at some number on the Avenue de l'Opera.

"Because I am business man, I desire to make some money. I have offered to provide her Highness with passports, money and all needful things if she will go to Russia and locate the treasure. I will aid her to bring it out—"

"And what do you get out of it?"

"For my trouble and risk I ask only twenty per cent of the value of the collection."

"And that is why you have made life so hard for her in Paris, driving her from one position after the other, forcing her into starvation!" There was a note of anger in Jack's voice.

"Ah, but Monsieur, it was for her own good!" cried the stout man. "She can make but a miserable living and she is so wealthy in her own right if she would but be sensible."

Jack studied the table top thoughtfully for a space. There was some truth in what the fellow said. If she knew of the location of these jewels it should not be a very hard matter to get into Soviet Russia, seize them and get out again. But for a woman it would be well nigh impossible, he was forced to admit. At the same time the thing intrigued him. Idle for the time being he was seeking something to keep him occupied. He had enough money for his simple needs, but this failed to buy him contentment, only work well done could supply that.

"You will help me convince her, Monsieur?" the Russian watched his face eagerly. "I can see that you have influence with her—never have I seen her look at a man as she looked at you!" The fellow stated this overwhelming fact simply and it succeeded in thrilling Jack in spite of himself. But then the Russian went on: "Also there would be something in it for you. I might give you, say"—and here he studied the American calculatingly—"five per cent of my share!"

"I don't want any of your damn share!" growled Jack, and rose from the table, thoughtful and preoccupied, bidding the plainly disappointed merchant a curt good night.

CHAPTER II

IT was with a great deal of impatience that he awaited the girl at that little café near the Louvre the night following. At last she came and his heart missed a beat as he saw her grave eyes look-

ing about the crowded place questioningly and then saw them light up at recognition of him.

In spite of his joy at seeing her he could not help but notice that she cast an apprehensive glance behind her as she came to his table. The unaffected cordiality of her greeting charmed and delighted him, so that he forgot to ask her what it was that frightened her.

"I met your fat friend last night," he told her as soon as she was seated.

YOU know now why he always follows me?" she asked.

"Yes, he has told me—" and then broke off quickly as he saw her startled glance direct itself at the door.

Following the direction of her gaze he saw two men enter, one of them tall and thin and the other small and nervous looking. The tall man wore a straggly mustache, while the shorter man wore heavy lensed glasses, gold-rimmed, which gave him a studious air.

They entered without looking at anyone and took a table just inside of the entrance. The girl stared at them with wide, frightened eyes, and her face paled.

"What is it?" asked Jack. But she gave no answer and only shook her head, seeming unable to speak.

Finally she found her voice.

"Oh, take me from here, please, please, immediately!"

"What the devil!" returned Jack, staring at the two newcomers in annoyed fashion.

"Don't ask me now," she pleaded, "but let us go quickly."

Considerably perturbed and more than little annoyed at the intrusion of these two strangers, Jack nevertheless fell in with her mood. Rising from their place he and the girl made their way to the entrance.

As they passed the table of the two newcomers, Jack watched them narrowly and found that the two had raised their heads and were gazing at them in disinterested fashion.

"Do you want to shake those two fellows?" he asked her as they reached the curb and hailed a taxi.

"Oh, if I could but get away from them for a little while," she half moaned.

Without another word Jack helped her into the waiting taxi and gave the directions to the driver in a low voice. Jack knew his Paris and by the time the taxi driver had followed his directions they had twisted and turned through the narrow streets of the Left Bank until all trace of them was surely lost. They came out on a veritable rabbit warren of small streets among which Jack led the way confidently, coming out at last to a small restaurant near the Senate.

IF that doesn't shake them off our trail," he said forcefully as he sat down at the table, "then I'm a Dutchman!"

The girl had recovered a little of her courage and Jack found something very pleasing in her dependence upon him and her serene confidence in his powers.

"Now, my dear young lady," he said, "won't you tell me who those fellows are and why you are so frightened of them?"

"Oh, them," she shrugged her shoulders, "it is not of them personally that I am afraid. It is of what they represent and all the evil cruelty that lies behind them. They are members of the OGPU."

Jack's eyebrows raised at the mention of the name of this terrible secret police of the Soviet government.

"That sounds a little serious," he commented.

"And it is serious," she whispered,

accepting the cigarette he offered her. "Sometimes I feel like some hunted animal! If only I could get away from it all!" she cried, tearing her handkerchief nervously.

"Cheer up," said Jack soothingly. "We'll find a way out. Why are they pursuing you?"

"God knows," she said, "but they keep me under watch every minute of the day and night. They do not allow me a moment's freedom from spies. Oh, it is terrible! And they can do such horrible things, kidnaping people and making people disappear. I am afraid every minute of the day and night that they will seize me and torture me to death as they tortured my father to death."

"Do you mean to say that you are afraid of the Bolsheviki here in the twentieth century in Paris, one of the greatest and most civilized cities in the world?"

SHE smiled at him a little wearily. "You do not understand," she said. "If only I could get away, but I have nothing except the clothes that I wear."

"It seems a pity," he said, "that you who have so much wealth buried there in Russia should be put to such straits here in Paris. Is there not some way we could get that out of Russia for you?"

"I have thought of that," she said. "I see only one way and that is to agree to Boris Brodsky's plan and allow him to aid me to recover my father's jewels. I have about made up my mind to do so. I can stand this no longer!"

Jack, looking at her eyes and noting the fright and worry in them, was certain that she spoke the truth when she said she had reached the limit of her endurance.

"No," he said, "I have a better

scheme. In the first place, do you trust me?"

"Oh, I do!" she cried impulsively, and for a second placed her hand over his in a spontaneous gesture of friendship that was strangely thrilling to Jack.

"Good! Then starting from that," he continued, "let me make an offer. I am in search of excitement and have nothing on hand at the moment. Let me go to Russia, locate the treasure and bring it back here to France."

"Oh, but the risk is terrible," she cried. "They would shoot you, pouf, like that!" She snapped her fingers, then, shaking her head, "no, I could not let you run this risk for me."

NONSENSE," returned Jack. "It is less risk than you think. In the first place, I am an engineer and American engineers are in demand in Russia and are well treated. In the second place, I am already the recipient of an offer from the Soviet government to go down and take charge of some work near the Besarabian border.

"I am going to try it," went on Jack. "First, I will see that you are left here with funds enough to carry on. As a matter of fact, you can take my apartment and servants in my absence and live in comfort and free from worry. If you are too proud to accept that, remember it is simply a business arrangement and you can reimburse me when I succeed in finding and bringing back the treasure."

"Oh, I will give you half of it," cried the girl generously.

"You will do nothing of the kind," returned Jack shortly, "but it is understood, is it not, that I shall go?"

The girl, still protesting at the risk he was running, finally acceded, but when it came to the exact location of the treasure she was vague.

"My father only sent me a single message," she said, "saying that the treasure was concealed near the manor house."

"Did he give any further information?"

"Yes," she knitted her brows, "he said that the treasure 'was guarded by fire' and that is all. But there is at the manor one of our old servants, an ancient Cossack *utenofficier* who followed my father through the Japanese war and the World War and is devoted to our family. When you see him, say to him simply that Nathasha has not forgotten the song of Yaroslav the Wise. He will understand and know that you are from me."

"What is the old Cossack's name?" asked Jack.

"Ivan Ivanovitch Kousmitch," she replied. "When I last heard from him he was working there on the collective farm, but that has been a year ago."

"Good," said Jack, "now we are set. I don't think it would be wise for us to be seen together too much. Tomorrow I will go to the Russian Embassy and make arrangements to accept that position they offered me and start out immediately."

But things were not to work out as easily as that. On his return to his apartment that night, Jack found Brodsky awaiting him and a stubborn and threatening Brodsky who insisted upon being counted in upon the deal. Jack bade him a curt good-night and showed him the door. The Russian left with a muttered threat.

THE potency of that threat Jack did not discover until the day following when he went to the Soviet Embassy and found that in some unexplained fashion the whole matter of his being sent to Soviet Russia as an engineer had been made impossible. Puzzled and angry he left

the Russian Embassy and returned to his quarters only to find Brodsky again awaiting him.

"You see my friend, you can do nothing without me," said the man suavely.

AND Jack saw. Figuring the matter out he decided to accept the stout Russian's offer of passports and facilities for twenty percent of the value of the treasure. It was not a very satisfactory arrangement but so far as he could see was the only way out.

And so it was arranged. It took a very short time to prepare for the journey.

The last evening that Jack was to spend in Paris before the trip he and the girl danced and dined at a gay little restaurant on the rue Gaumartin. There was something tragic and wistful about her and Jack saw very plainly that she was frightened and had little hope of the successful end of the adventure. His belief was confirmed when towards the close of the evening she again attempted to dissuade him.

"What are a few old jewels," she asked, "compared to happiness and life?"

"And love," added Jack. Somehow their hands sought and found each other across the table and for a single glorious second it was as though no one else existed.

It was then that she gazed over his shoulder. Her face went white and she trembled back in her chair.

"There they are again!" she whispered tensely.

Jack was too wise to turn about and stare but found a mirror gleaming in front of them and in its depths saw at a table farther down the room, the two men, the agents of the OGPU, whom he had successfully eluded the night before. They were in evening clothes this time, the tall one wear-

ing a monocle and the short one with his heavy lensed glasses, seeming strangely out of place in this sophisticated, well dressed gathering.

THE men made no attempt to follow them as they left but Jack took precautions, nevertheless, to shake them off and left the girl at the door of her own hotel, a little place on the rue Cherche Midi. Here for a second she trembled in his arms and Jack found his cheeks moist with her tears as he left.

It was arranged between Brodsky and Jack that they should fly to Bucharest in Roumania and from Bucharest to Kishinev which was the Military Headquarters of the Roumanian army on the borders of Bessarabia.

From Kishinev it was only a matter of a comparatively few miles to Balta. The river Dneister lay between, that river so rigorously guarded on the one side by Roumanians and with such a strong cordon of Soviet soldiers on the other side.

True to their agreement, after the departure of Jack Nelson and his Russian companion, the girl moved her few small belongings over to Jack's apartment where the married couple who acted as butler and cook welcomed her and installed her.

Several days passed and she heard no word nor expected to hear any but a cable came at the end of the fourth day. It was dated from Kishinev.

"Expecting to learn about the Song of Yaroslav the Wise tomorrow," it was signed, "Jack." And she knew that he was on the eve of entering that vast mysterious place of intrigue and plot and danger that Russia had become under the Soviet.

All that night she paced the floor, oppressed by the foreboding of evil and it was not until daylight be-

gan to gild the roofs of Paris that she sank into a troubled sleep.

She was not permitted to enjoy this long, however, for at nine o'clock she was informed that there were visitors to see her, two men, evidently Russians. Her face went white at the news.

"What do they look like?" she asked breathlessly.

"One of them is tall and the other very short," said the maid. And Marie's eyes widened in fright.

For a moment she could not speak and then wearily directed that they be allowed to enter the drawing room and wait for her.

The two of them rose at her arrival and bowed low over her hand. As she had feared they were the two agents of the Ogpu who had persisted in shadowing her about Paris.

THEY wasted little time in coming to the point.

"We have received information this morning," said the taller man who acted as spokesman, "that Monsieur Jack Nelson, the American engineer, has crossed the frontier of Bessarabia into Soviet Russia and is on his way to Balta."

"You know this?" said the girl with a catch in her voice.

"Of course," returned the tall Russian.

"And what is it that you require of me?" asked the girl faintly.

The tall man began to explain. To her growing horror Marie discovered that the Ogpu knew every move made by the men she had learned to love and that he existed only by their sufferance.

"But he has passports and safe conduct," she whispered.

"Furnished him by Boris Brodsky," returned the tall Russian composedly, "who is guarding him."

"Guarding him!" the girl looked

up startled, "then Boris Brodsky is. . . .?"

"... one of the most trusted members of the Ogpu," returned the Russian calmly.

There was silence in the room for a space. The two men discreetly looked the other way as the girl fought for composure. At last the tall one turned his head.

"Naturally the life of Mr. Nelson is forfeited any time we wish to say the word."

The girl nodded miserably.

"What do you wish of me?" she answered in a low voice.

The two Russians glanced at each other with something of satisfaction in their eyes.

"It is all very simple," said the taller man again, "I will be frank with you, Mademoiselle. We are not sure that Mr. Nelson knows the location of the treasure on your father's estate. Or that he will divulge it to us even if we do put him in restraint. For this reason we will offer to make a bargain with you."

The girl stared at him, sombre tragedy showing in her eyes.

"Yes, Mademoiselle," continued the tall Russian, "we will exchange Mr. Nelson's life for the treasure. But you must accompany us to Soviet Russia!"

CHAPTER III

THE airplane trip from Paris to Bucharest was uneventful. Brodsky slept most of the time while Jack Nelson stared into space, trying to foresee in advance the difficulties he would have to encounter.

Once arrived at Bucharest, Brodsky insisted on sticking closely to him and it was with grave difficulty that Jack succeeded in getting away from the Russian for an hour or two. This

hour he spent with Prince Manu-lesco, a Roumanian nobleman with whom he had been associated in some work for the government after the armistice. At the finish of this visit he returned to his hotel where he found Brodsky pacing the floor.

"Where have you been and what have you been doing?" asked the Russian sharply.

"None of your damn business," returned Jack, his voice calm.

The Russian swallowed hard and became suave again although there was an ugly look in his eye as he studied the tall American. Arrangements were soon made for the completion of the flight and they flew to Kishinev the next morning, piloted by a Roumanian civilian pilot.

THE formalities of Kishinev were soon completed and from here they went by motor to the river, arriving there at noon the next day.

Roumanian soldiers in gray uniforms and felt hats examined their papers and let them pass over on the ferry.

Jack gazed curiously at the Soviet military representatives awaiting him on the far bank. The soldiers looked businesslike in grayish brown uniforms with felt helmets carrying a red star on their front.

A stockily built, unsmiling Russian officer wearing a well-cut blouse, pink gallifet breeches and soft Russian boots examined their papers. There seemed to be good discipline amongst his men and Jack realized that the Red Army had improved greatly since he had seen it last.

"You speak no Russian?" asked the officer in French.

"No," lied Jack with a straight face.

He wondered why the fact that he had spent many years in Russia was not noted on his passport. Evidently it was not. Aside from

this question the frontier guards said nothing more, although the officer drew Brodsky aside and the two men talked together for some five or ten minutes. Whatever it was about, Jack saw that Brodsky had reassured the officer for they were allowed to pass through.

Jack had long since ceased to worry about the ease with which Brodsky secured favors from the Russians. He had put him down as an influential merchant who stood high in favor of the Soviet and let it go at that.

They arrived at Balta late in the evening and found quarters at a small inn which was bare of the most ordinary necessities but at least provided a fairly clean bed and *borsch* and hot tea for the travelers.

It had been agreed between Brodsky and Jack that the American was to pose as the representative of an American business firm manufacturing tractors and sent over by his chiefs to study the needs of the Russians at first hand.

In conformity with this it was not difficult to secure permission to stay for several weeks at the collective farm which had its headquarters in the manor house once dominating the vast estates of the former Prince Paletzine.

BEFORE their departure for the collective farm, a Russian girl, extremely pretty, but with something very hard about her eyes, joined the two, announcing that she was sent by the local Soviet to act as interpreter.

She was clever, that girl and witty and spoke English without a trace of accent. Jack did not see any necessity of an interpreter seeing that Brodsky was with him but the Soviet authorities had deemed otherwise and he very quickly came to the conclu-

sion that this girl was set over him as a spy.

They arrived shortly at the vast collective farm with its hordes of ragged laborers, its crowds of stocky, ill-favored peasant women slaving in the fields and its great fleet of tractors. The farm superintendent, an extremely young agricultural engineer, greeted the new arrivals and assigned them to quarters in the great manor house.

When Jack found that the girl was to occupy the same room he objected but his objections were blandly overruled and Vera, which she gave as her name, calmly took up her bag and preempted one of the soldier cots.

There was something so unfeminine about this girl that Jack almost ceased to look upon her as a woman and soon forgot the unconventionality of the proceeding in his annoyance at the close fashion in which Vera shadowed him, scarce leaving him for a minute by day or by night.

The first day or two Jack spent inspecting the estate, closely followed by Vera who stuck to him more closely than a brother. It was a confusing picture, this great estate changed from the ownership of a private master to the directorship of a bureau in far Moscow.

The net of surveillance which was tightened about him effectually prevented him from making any investigations into the secret of the treasure.

In spite of it all, the sense of being watched did not prevent him from keeping a sharp eye out for the old family retainer of whom Marie had told him.

It was about the third day that he located his man and then watched for an opportunity to get word to him. Ivan Kousmitch worked in the blacksmith shop, which was one of a group of buildings below the

manor house. Pretending that one of the angle irons on his soldier cot needed repairing. Jack took occasion to appear at the shop.

VERA, as ever, was at his side but the heat was intense near the forge and she dropped back to avoid the shower of sparks that came flying out from under the hammer of one of the blacksmith's assistants, nearby. With the angle iron in his hand, Jack came close to the big bearded Cossack in his leather apron.

"You are Ivan Kousmitch?" he asked in a low voice in Russian.

"Da da," returned the old Cossack, staring at him suspiciously.

"I've come from the Princess Marie," went on Jack steadily. "She told me to remind you of the Song of Yaroslav the Wise."

The old man nearly dropped his sledge hammer but quickly recovered himself and fingered the angle iron with reflective eye.

"Yes, yes," he said, "you come from her, there is no doubt. I taught her that song when she was a small child and always she would sit on my knee in the garden and sing it for me. What do you want of me?" asked the old man humbly.

"I come to secure the jewels for Her Highness."

The old man looked up sharply.

"You have her authority?" he asked.

"She told me that the jewels are guarded by fire," returned Jack.

The old man nodded, seeming to be studying the angle iron.

"Da da," nodded the old man still seemingly intent upon the angle iron, "of all the people in the world only the Prince himself, the Princess and myself know that. You could not have known it lest one of the three of us had told you. Yes, I can fix this for you immediately."

Ivan had raised his voice slightly

and Jack saw out of the corner of his eye that Vera was edging nearer, trying to overhear what they were saying. But as she stepped towards them old Kousmitch said something in a low tone to his assistant who redoubled his blows on the heated iron and scattered a heavy shower of sparks about, the sight of which drove the girl back again out of ear-shot.

"Da, da," said the old man, "His Highness the Prince will be happy to learn news of his daughter."

Jack had grave difficulty in repressing a start of astonishment.

"The Prince? Then he is still alive?" he asked, incredulous.

"Aye," returned the blacksmith composedly and jerked his head sideways towards his assistant.

For the first time Jack closely observed the men working nearby. The blacksmith's assistant was a spare, lean but tall Russian, white headed and white bearded, dressed in the inevitable Soviet Russian peasant costume.

In spite of his attire, Jack saw that there was something about this man of an intelligence and a pride that was lacking to the average peasant. It was only as he studied his face that he repressed a faint gasp of horror as the man turned his head towards him.

For the blacksmith's assistant stared, unseeing, out of blackened and cavernous eye sockets.

AS the blacksmith's assistant moved, Jack observed for the first time that heavy chains were riveted about his ankles and dragged behind him on the hard packed earthen floor of the blacksmith shop.

"And is that Prince Palitzine, a blacksmith's assistant, blinded and in chains!" breathed Jack still incredulous.

Ivan Kousmitch dropped his head on his chest.

"Aye," he groaned, "and it was I who forged the shackles and I who . . . God forgive me, was forced to burn out his eyes with the red hot irons!"

Try as he might Jack could scarcely keep from showing his shocked amazement at this tragedy of Soviet Russia. It was the voice of Ivan Kousmitch, the old Cossack non-commissioned officer who recalled him to his surroundings.

"Take care, *barin*," he cautioned, "the woman watches us!"

ONLY then did Jack recover his presence of mind and pretend to be interested in the details of the primitive bellows and forge and smith's tools.

"And you alone, Ivan Ivanoc, remain of all the Prince's former followers?" asked Jack.

"Nyet, No," the old man shook his head, "there be many of us, some forty or fifty all told, Cossacks of the Prince's old regiment who have drifted in here and act as laborers, and wait, hoping to aid the Prince when the opportunity comes.

"Most of these live in the Cossack stanitza of Orloff, no more than a *verst* from here. Make an excuse to visit that place and I will tell my comrades to make themselves known to you," whispered the old non-commissioned officer, then raising his voice, he said in the manner of one finishing a long discussion, "*da*, yes, I will repair it and bring it to you tomorrow afternoon," and with that the old man turned to his forge as though he had lost all interest in his visitor.

The girl, Vera, glanced at Jack suspiciously once or twice as he rejoined her and he quickly threw off the intense preoccupation into

which the startling news he had just heard had plunged him. He chatted with her of inconsequential matters as they strode back towards the manor house.

Here he found Boris Brodsky, the stout Russian who had accompanied him from Paris, awaiting in visible impatience. Jack noted for the first time that he had seen very little of Brodsky for the last day or two. He greeted him casually enough, not noticing that Brodsky flashed a meaning glance at Vera who had drifted away in unconcerned fashion.

"Now my friend," said the Russian, without a preamble, "we have been here too long. The authorities are becoming suspicious of us. We must locate that treasure immediately and make all efforts to get away from here. If we do not, not even my efforts can guard us from harm. What have you discovered so far and why don't you share with me the secret of the hiding place of the treasure?" Brodsky's tone was angry and a little threatening.

STEADY now, old timer," returned Jack easily, "you forget that I have very little except general information upon which to go and that I am constantly under surveillance and dare not make any extended search."

The Russian shook his head angrily.

"I tell you," he stated flatly, "if something is not done within the next twenty-four hours I cannot be responsible for the consequences. If you do not divulge to me the hiding place of that treasure by ten o'clock tomorrow night, I fear things will go very badly with you, my dear friend!"

And with that Brodsky irritably swung his cane and turning about, strode away.

CHAPTER III

JACK walked into the house, his eyes narrowed and his head bowed thoughtfully. He was convinced by now that Brodsky was hand in glove with the Soviet authority and had reached the limit of his patience and was ready to strike. What would happen did he not divulge the hiding place of the treasure by ten o'clock of the night following he could fairly well imagine, having just seen the old Prince Palitzine, his eyes burned out with red-hot irons.

"Let's get some horses and go for a ride, Vera," he said, turning to the girl.

"Certainly, if you wish it," she answered calmly enough.

She led him down the manor house to a long shed where many shaggy Russian ponies were tethered. Jack found saddles and bridles and saddled Vera's horse for her, and fussed about while tightening the girth. The girl knew the way toward the Cossack *stanitza* and they started out at a trot.

They had not gone more than fifteen minutes on the way when suddenly Vera's horse became afflicted with madness. It stopped short in its tracks, its eyes wild and staring. Then it doubled up like a jack-knife attempting to unseat its rider.

Vera was a fair horsewoman at that, for she managed to cling. Seeing the futility of trying to rid himself of his burden in this fashion, the horse suddenly whirled about and galloped full speed back toward the stables, paying no attention to the ineffectual pulling of the girl on the reins.

In another two minutes Jack sat his horse alone on the road—Vera and her mount rapidly disappearing from view in a cloud of dust. With a faint grin on his face he turned

about, lifted up the *nagiaga* from the pommel of the saddle and flicked his horse lightly with its lead-weighted leather thongs and galloped easily toward the Cossack *stanitza*.

No one, to look at Jack Nelson would ever have accused him of slipping a cockle burr under the saddle blanket of a horse ridden by a woman.

The Cossack *stanitza* was a prosperous and well cared for looking village surrounded by log walls which gave it a military air. This air was intensified by the alert and soldierly looking appearance of the Cossacks themselves who had been granted a large measure of freedom in the Soviet in deference to their power and their ancient tradition of fidelity to the government.

Scarcely had Jack ridden within the gate when a black-bearded, blue-eyed Cossack rose from a bench and beckoned him down a side alley between a row of hewn log houses decorated in Russian fashion with ornate carvings below the roof and on the ridge poles.

Wary and suspicious, Jack followed the man who signaled him to dismount before the door of a long log building that had all the air of being a barracks.

Dismounting, Jack hesitated a moment at the darkness within the doorway. Observing this, his guide stepped close to him.

"We sing the song of Jarosky the Wise in here, barin," whispered his guide.

Reassured by this, Jack stepped into the gloom of the interior. It took him a minute or two to grow accustomed to the poor light, but once he did, he found the place filled with men, dark figures in the gloom who pressed about him.

"What do you require of us, mas-

ter?" whispered one of them and his words were echoed by the men around him.

"Da, da, yes, yes, master, tell us what you require of us."

I REQUIRE this," returned Jack, and listen well to me, O Cossacks! First, you will tell Ivan Kousmitch to bring me . . ." and here he whispered the word. "Secondly, be armed and ready, mounted at ten o'clock tomorrow night and remain in hiding close to the manor house. When word is sent you rescue Prince Paletzine, strike off his shackles, have a fast horse for him and bring him here to the *stanitza*. Do you understand, Cossacks?"

"To hear is to obey, master," whispered the voices around him. In a few minutes Jack was outside riding around the *stanitza* like a mildly curious visitor.

Returning to the manor house, he found Vera nursing her bruises, but seemingly unsuspecting of the fact that Jack had been the cause of them. She accompanied him as he strolled through the manor house.

She chatted along pleasantly enough, but Jack replied to her only in monosyllables, his mind working feverishly trying to solve the mystery of that expression "guarded by fire."

The rooms and halls were well guarded in this manor house, there being a Red soldier stationed at every point, shaggy men leaning on their long Russian rifles and so many of them that Jack never felt himself free from surveillance.

At five o'clock that afternoon the old Cossack blacksmith brought up the angle iron newly welded.

Vera was nearby and there was very little chance to say anything or to gather any information from the old Cossack. The angle iron once fixed in place, the old man

rose and dusted his knees while Jack started to return his heavy suitcase to its place under the bed. It was lying spread open.

"The *barin* has much laundry to be washed," said the old man.

"Yes, an accumulation of several days," grunted Jack, pushing the suitcase with his foot.

"Perhaps the *barin* would allow my sister to wash it for him?" said the old fellow.

"Gladly," returned Jack.

"If the *barin* will have it ready tomorrow she will come to fetch it."

"Fine," said Jack, noting for the first time a meaning glance in the old man's eyes.

Vera was seated on the opposite side of the small room, lighting a long tubed Russian cigarette and seemingly uninterested in the conversation. Nor did she rise when the blacksmith went to the door and Jack accompanied him out into the dining room. There was only one Red guard on duty in the dining room, and he was leaning on crossed arms, gazing out the window, his back to them.

"Here are things you require, *barin*," whispered old Ivan, handing him at the same time a small round box such as druggists use for dispensing pills. And the two men conversed. The exchanges of words took scarce two minutes, but at that, Vera, yawning and stretching, came dawdling to the doorway and Ivan shuffled off about his business.

JACK lighted a cigarette for himself and tried not to let his excitement show in the tremor of his hands. He had found what he wanted to know. There remained now only to act upon the information he had received. It would have to be that night or never. Tomorrow night would be too late, for the Soviet authorities would strike before then.

GENERALLY around seven or eight o'clock a tray of food was brought to the room by a hulking Red guard. As usual it came this night. It consisted of a portion of *borsch* and black bread and butter, some Russian meat patties and two glasses of steaming tea.

Vera excused herself to make her toilette and the second that she disappeared Jack acted swiftly, shaking two or three tablets from the small round box into her glass of tea. They immediately dissolved, leaving no trace except a faint cloudiness in the hot liquid.

So that there should be no error he sipped some of his own tea and threw the remainder out the window, leaving an empty glass on his side of the tray.

The two of them ate their supper very amicably. Vera drained the tea down. It grew dark after supper and Jack lighted the candles, casting a glance at the girl occasionally. Going out on some excuse or another he located a wooden bucket outside near the well and took occasion to fill it with water and to bring it back with him, placing it outside the door.

On his return he found Vera yawning and looking rather vacant.

"I am sleepy, *Tovarische*," she complained once or twice, rubbing her eyes, and with no further excuses she loosened her blouse and skirt, kicked off her shoes and composed herself to rest on her narrow bed.

In less than a minute she was sound asleep, breathing regularly and deeply. To test the strength of her slumber, Jack placed his hand on her shoulder and called to her in a low tone. It made absolutely no impression upon her and she continued to sleep. Jack breathed a sigh of relief. Then blowing out the candles, he went on tiptoe to the

door and gazed out into the dining room.

A single candle illumined one corner of the room. By its faint light he could barely discern the form of the sentinel slouched over a bench at the edge of the table, chewing at his ration of black bread and gulping down an occasional mouthful of scalding tea.

JACK casually strolled over his way and pulled out a package of American cigarettes, offering one to the man. The fellow rose politely and accepted it as Jack leaned against the table. While the man sniffed at the tobacco appreciatively Jack dropped three more of the small tablets into the glass of hot tea and stood there, giving them time to dissolve.

This done, he strolled back to his own room, finding Vera still soundly asleep. In a few minutes the inevitable happened, for the Russian sentinel grew drowsier and drowsier. Finally the man leaned his head forward on his arms and began to snore, his black bread unfinished.

Listening carefully, Jack heard the sound of voices coming from the front hall where there were two more sentinels on duty. From the direction of the kitchen came the strains of a *balalaika* and the sound of voices raised in song.

Taking the wooden bucket filled with water from beside his doorway Jack went quickly across the room and out through the door leading into the corridor. Here there was a box filled with billets of wood and to one side of it a small iron door set into the wall. This he opened and threw in the contents of the bucket on the fire inside.

A cloud of steam and smoke arose and he quickly closed the door and hurried out to the well again to re-

fill the bucket. Once more he doused the water into the firebox and then went back into the dining room. Here he paused, listening a moment. It seemed to him that he had heard a cautious footstep.

The huge porcelain stove filled the corner of the room. No further sound came to disturb him and he went to the right-hand side and fumbled in the dark with two or three knobs of porcelain that jutted out from the smooth surface. One of these gave as he twisted it and the warm smooth slab of porcelain opened to his touch, showing a narrow, low doorway. Into this he pushed himself, stooping low to avoid the heated top and sides.

FOR a second he gasped with the warmth and felt for a step with his foot. Finding it, he closed the door gently behind him and went on down some seven steps, striking matches to light his way.

Again he listened uneasily, for it seemed to him he had heard the scrape of following footsteps. At last putting it down to an over-active imagination, he went on.

In another minute he found himself in a narrow, low passageway which descended until he figured he must be about the level of the cellar. Here it straightened out again and he followed it for fifty or sixty yards until he felt fresh air and knew that he was passing by the well underneath whose rim a small air shaft opened out. Continuing he turned sharply to the right and came to rest before another door. This one was of wood, strongly bolted with iron.

Glancing upward apprehensively he noted the presence of four great logs poised above the door and so lightly poised that a very slight application of force would dislodge them into the passageway beneath.

Treading carefully, he tried the door and found that it gave to his touch and entered into a small chamber cut into the solid rock.

Against one wall were stacked some painted canvasses, valuable paintings. Arranged upon shelves in the other wall were silver candelabra and huge dishes and trays and flagons of solid silver engraved with the arms of the Palitzine family. Glancing over this swiftly he estimated there must be forty or fifty thousand dollars worth of silver there, but it was not that which he sought.

Striking matches and fumbling along the wall he came to an *ikon* set within the rock. This he touched at its lower edge and it gave to his pressure, opening inwards to disclose a small cavern in the wall.

In this reposed a massive silver box with a small key tied to the handle. The lock gave easily, opening up and disclosing to his view a burst of fire reflected from diamonds and emeralds and rubies. The sight of it made him gasp, so huge were many of the jewels.

Swiftly he noted the presence of a large number of loose emeralds, some fifteen or sixteen ornate gold and platinum rings set with pearls and diamonds and rubies, a spray of gold set solidly with emeralds and innumerable gem-studded lavalieres, brooches and bar-pins. It was a vision of wealth in jewels such as he had never seen. He spent at least ten minutes there, lost to the passage of time, his surroundings forgotten.

IT was the scrape of leather against stone and the sound of heavy breathing that made him instantly alert. Dropping his match, he stamped it out and moved forward, crouching, his whole being tense and alert.

It seemed an eternity before at

last he heard that heavy breathing again, this time nearer and within reaching distance. Without pause to think of consequences he lashed out savagely in the darkness.

His fist came into contact with human flesh. There was a grunt and a smothered exclamation and suddenly the unknown person turned and fled. Fearing it might be a trap, Jack stood for a moment, hearing the footsteps racing along the passage back toward the manor house. It came over him that all was lost if this unknown succeeded in escaping him, and he raced after the sound of the fleeing man.

Ahead of him he heard someone scrambling madly up the stairs. Again he was in the heat that filled the small passageway directly beneath the stove. As he hurried up the steps he heard someone scramble through the opening and the door was slammed into place in front of him.

UNDETERRED, he fumbled at the lock, finally having to give it up and strike a match. In the light he managed to work the intricate mechanism and the door gave to his touch.

Not knowing what awaited him on the far side, he struggled through the opening, one arm upraised to ward off a blow and came out again in the dining room, looking about him in startled fashion.

The single candle light still flickered at the far end of the room. Nearby in the shadows reposed the sleeping sentinel, snoring stentoriously, his head on his arms. From the front of the house still came the subdued talk of the sentinels by the great door. From the rear of the house toward the kitchen came the tinkle of the *balalaika* and the sound of voices raised in song.

All things seemed to be as he had

left them, including Vera, who lay stretched out sound asleep on her cot.

Puzzled and more than apprehensive, Jack listened for some sound that might mean the raising of an alarm—but none came. Whoever the mysterious unknown could be he was evidently lying low, but his presence had introduced a new and sinister factor into the situation.

There was little to be done that night. The entire success of the scheme agreed upon between him and Ivan depended upon the developments the next day and he dropped on to his cot and spent a restless night waiting for dawn.

Apprehensive, he waited next morning for some sign from the unknown whom he had struck in the dark. The morning passed without any clue as to who it might have been. Vera rose, complaining of a slight headache, but unsuspecting of the fact that she had been drugged.

Some time near noon a bent and withered old peasant woman came in asking for his laundry, which he gave to her in a rough bundle placed in a gunny sack.

CHAPTER IV

THE day passed quickly. Jack found himself watching the hands of the clock moving inexorably towards ten o'clock. He was in his room once more, chatting with Vera who sat cross-legged on the other bed smoking one cigarette after another, when at last the clock showed five minutes to ten.

Suddenly they both stopped talking and listened. Vera stared at him in puzzled fashion, but Jack's face was expressionless as he steeled himself to composure. Nearer and nearer the sound, resolving itself into the tramp of many feet. There was a sharp command outside his

door and a crash of grounded arms followed by an authoritative knock.

Still outwardly composed, Jack strode to the door and flung it open to find a detachment of Red Guards lined up outside. They carried long bayoneted Russian rifles, menacing in the dim light of the dining room. A squat, Mongoloid looking, non-commissioned officer in charge informed him in guttural Russian that he was under arrest and must accompany them.

Still maintaining his fiction of not understanding Russian he pretended ignorance so that Vera translated for him, seeming somewhat startled herself.

The guards fell in on either side of him and he followed along as they clumped stolidly out of the building. It was dark outside with the faint rays of a new moon beginning to touch the landscape with silver.

Jack heaved a deep breath and looked off over the fields in the direction of the Cossack *stanitza*, peering intently into the darkness as he was led along. Then his heart leaped as his eyes picked up a darker clump of shadows coming from the direction of the *stanitza*. As he stared at it the pallid moon rays glimmered on steel high above the dark group.

The moonlight was shining on lance tips!

HE followed on with fresh courage, feeling secure now that at least the old Prince would be rescued. As for himself, he did not worry much, being nearly certain that he could bluff his way through somehow.

His guards led him toward a small building which he recognized as the Administration Offices of the collective farm. Arrived here he was made to wait in the outer corridor until at last an authoritative voice

barked some command from inside. The door was opened and he was led into a brilliantly lighted room.

As his eyes grew more accustomed to the glare he dimly made out the forms of several men. Four of these were officers, booted and spurred and wearing the uniform of the Red Guards. Seated next to them behind a long table were two men in civilian garb.

The figures of these were somehow familiar to Jack and he suddenly realized, with a shock, that they were the two agents of the OGPU who had so frightened Marie at that restaurant in Paris; the tall, thin man with the straggly mustache and the shorter man wearing heavy lensed glasses with gold rims. Jack looked steadily at the group of men behind the table. They had glanced at him as he came in and then continued a low-voiced discussion among themselves.

"What is it that you require of me and what is the meaning of this arrest?" Jack broke the silence in English, his voice simulating anger and puzzlement.

THE men behind the table glanced at him in disinterested fashion, studying him with all the detached and scientific interest of a group of vivisectionists staring at some animal brought into the laboratory.

A pink-cheeked, white-mustached officer, who bore the marks of a *Polkovnik* of Colonel on his blouse, stared at Jack reflectively for a moment, then clearing his throat, he began to speak in a dry official voice in English with a trace of accent.

"You are Mr. John Nelson?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Mr. Nelson," the Colonel went on, "it is our duty to inform you that you have been accused of invading Soviet Russia with the intention of

removing therefrom a quantity of valuable jewels formerly belonging to a so-called Prince Palitzine. It is unnecessary to say that these jewels are now the property of the Communistic State. What have you to say for yourself before we administer punishment?"

His voice was steady enough as he replied:

"It is easy enough to make wild accusations," he said, "but I have failed to hear any proof."

"Proof is non-essential to our procedure," returned the pink-faced officer. "It is only necessary that we assure ourselves of the guilt of the accused. We have so assured ourselves and wish to ask you if you have any statement to make before you are led forth and shot as an enemy of the Soviet."

NOTHING whatsoever," returned Jack, and stood there composedly enough to all outward seeming.

"Due to the importance and value of this treasure we, the court, are inclined to be lenient with you if you will state to us what you know of its location."

"I know nothing about it," returned Jack shortly.

There was a whispered consultation and then one of the officers strode to the door of the rear room and flung it open, calling to someone within. What this portended Jack did not know, but he watched the door narrowly.

Suddenly the night air was split by a shot followed by another and another which swelled into a crescendo of shots and yells. The officers behind the table rose with some agitation and hurried to the door. The Red Guards in the doorway gave way for them and stared out into the night.

Jack, his heart beating high with hope, moved toward the door and

stared over the shoulders of the men who guarded it, their backs to him.

AND then he thrilled as he saw the main road boiling with Cossacks, powerful men mounted on shaggy steppe horses, their long lances rising and falling as they speared viciously at a crowd of Red Guards who were attacking savagely with bayoneted rifles. There was little shooting by now. It seemed to be a matter of cold steel, and the Cossack swords were coming into play, glittering in the moonlight as they rose and fell and rose again.

That clump of lances was beset on all sides by Red Guards who swarmed from every building, but the Cossacks were more than holding their own, giving backward steadily and protecting someone in their midst.

Jack felt a glow of exultation go through him as he recognized the lone figure and saw the white beard and sightless eyes of old Prince Palitzine. The Cossacks had been true to their word!

They were steadily fighting their way up the road, moving in a compact body whose bared steel gleamed like fangs of wolves as they fought off the encroaching Red Guards.

Suddenly the shrill blast of a whistle came from somewhere and a voice raised itself in command. The Red Guards ceased their fighting with the bayonet and dropped back, forming a line. There came another command and the silence was broken by the clatter and rattle of breech blocks.

Jack's heart fairly stood still as he saw the Red Guards with hands on triggers. Scarcely a second elapsed before there was a crash and a roar as a volley was unloosed at the clump of Cossacks, scarcely fifty paces distance by now. Another volley and another followed in methodical, unhurried fashion.

The Cossack horses were rearing wildly. Men were falling from the saddles.

TO Jack's horror he saw the tall, bearded frame of old Prince Palitzine sway forward in the saddle and then slip to the ground.

It was all over in a few more seconds. The surviving Cossacks broke in all directions and disappeared, leaving behind the bodies of dead and wounded men and horses.

The Red Guards ceased firing and were led forward at the double, plunging their bayonets into the bodies strewn about the roadway and dispatching the wounded; others of them were led in detachments between the buildings. Jack heard the crash of an occasional volley, realizing dully that each reverberation meant the blasting out of existence of another loyal Cossack.

In a few minutes his judges returned.

The white mustached Colonel was the first to arrive.

"You see, my friend," he said in his dry official voice as he passed by Jack, "you see what happens to enemies of the Soviet!"

Jack saw and the sight had not helped to raise his store of self confidence or courage.

In another minute or two the group of Soviet officials had taken their places behind the table again. The Colonel wrapped for order and issued a sharp command. All eyes turned to that small doorway in the rear while Jack watched it narrowly. The first person to appear was a burly Red Guard with a bayoneted rifle who backed out, keeping his eyes on someone in rear.

Jack's heart skipped a beat and his jaw dropped open as he stared at the second person who followed slowly into the room.

For he was looking into the great,

frightened eyes and pale face of Marie.

A gasp of astonishment escaped him. She on her part flung out her hands to him.

"Oh, my dear, my dear," she half sobbed, "they have not harmed you yet? They told me that if I would come to Soviet Russia they would spare your life!"

He shook his head and tried to smile at her. Across that room their eyes spoke volumes. With all his joy at seeing her, Jack felt a cold fear settle upon him. But the voice of the senior officer interrupted his chaotic thoughts.

"This treasure has already resulted in too much trouble and difficulty for the Soviet," he announced. "It is our intention today to solve the mystery of it and locate it once and for all. Between the two of you there is knowledge of its location. I offer you the last opportunity to tell what you know. Do you accept the offer?"

MARIE looked at him blankly and then her eyes sought Jack's. Jack shook his head ever so slightly.

"I can understand," he said, "that you contemplate something very unpleasant for one or both of us if we do not tell. But supposing one or both of us does know where it is located, what would be our reward in case we divulge our information?"

"Free passage and a safe conduct to the borders of Soviet Russia," returned the senior officer glibly, almost too glibly, for his eyes shifted as he spoke. Jack realized instantly that their fate would be the same whatever they did.

"And if we do not know or do not tell, what then?" he asked.

The Soviet officer shrugged his shoulders.

"It then becomes our unpleasant

duty to extract the information by such crude and unpleasant means as lie in our power," he returned cynically and nodded to someone who stood at the outer door.

There was a sound of halting footsteps and Jack turned to find Ivan Kousmitch, being prodded into the room by the two husky Red soldiers. The blacksmith carried a portable charcoal brazier and five or six deadly looking iron rods heated to cherry red heat by the coals. The old man looked absolutely dazed. His sunken eyes lit up at sight of Marie and then he slumped and stood there like some broken thing.

Jack did not flinch as he saw the smoking brazier and the heated irons. It was not until the guards behind Marie seized her that he grasped the enormity of what was intended. So horror stricken was he for the moment that no words came. He surged forward protectingly only to find strong arms grasping him and a bayonet resting against his chest.

"You see, my friend," said the pink cheeked officer, "what suffering your silence will cause. And do not forget that this treasure which you seek to guard has already caused the death of the former Prince Palitzine who was already blinded by the heated irons."

CHAPTER V

THE white mustached Colonel nodded to the guards. Two of them suddenly laid hands on Marie. They half dragged and half carried her to a heavy chair under the glare of the lights. In this they placed her and tied her hand and foot as she gazed pitiously at Jack who stood there helpless, surrounded by a ring of steel.

There came another nod from the

white mustached Colonel and Ivan Kousmitch was pulled forward. The old Cossack was wild-eyed and frantic.

Suddenly he flung himself on his knees, his hands raised supplicatingly towards the men behind the table.

"For the love of God," he cried, "do not force me to do this thing! I have held the little dove in my arms when she was first born! I taught her little feet to walk and sang songs to her . . . ask me anything, anything but this!" he pleaded.

THE judges looked at him coldly. The Colonel jerked his head to the Red Guards. They hauled the old man up on his feet. One of them placed the heated rod, its steel gleaming a dull red and its wooden handle smoking, in the old man's shaking hand. Two more guards jabbed him with their bayonets so that he was forced forward until he was standing over the wide-eyed and horrified girl.

"Burn out the left eye first," came the dry voice of the Colonel.

For the first time the full brutality of what was intended swept over Jack and left him horror stricken. The old man trembled nearer and nearer with the red-hot iron. Marie tried to avert her head but a Red Guard behind her grasped it between his two hands and held it straight in the path of the wavering rod of iron.

Suddenly a groan was torn from Jack.

"Hold it!" his voice rose in an anguished cry, "I will lead you to the treasure!"

A curt word came from the senior officer. The old Cossack dropped the heated rod from palsied fingers. The men who had seized and held Marie relaxed their firm grip. A sigh that was half a sob came from the girl.

They wasted no time but rose and prepared to set forth. It was Jack who spoke up as they started to lead him on alone, leaving Marie behind with her guards.

He halted stubbornly in place.

"I cannot do this alone," he said, "my knowledge extends only to the outward entrance of the treasure vault. I need the aid of Her Highness to direct me into the inner chamber," he finished and waited for the reply.

At least if they were to die, he reasoned swiftly, they might as well die together. As he waited for the reply he saw the tall gray bearded form of Ivan Koustmitch shambling off into the night.

There was another consultation between the four officers. Plainly they were impatient to be at the task and they quickly gave their assent. Marie was led forth, still pale and frightened looking. Preceded by several soldiers and followed by the officers they made their way up the road to the entrance of the manor house.

Someone disappeared within the door as they came in view. So quickly did the figure flit away that Jack could not quite tell who it was but he was certain that it was Boris Brodsky. He wondered about Brodsky and what part that mysterious individual had in the whole affair. But there was little time to reflect upon this.

They were close to the manor house now. Stepping forward Jack led the way with Marie clinging to his arm. Once inside the dining-room he led towards the stove, found the knobs on the porcelain and swung open the door.

A GASP of amazement went up from the Russians behind. Jack led the way through the narrow entrance, pulling Marie in after him. It was a warm day and no one had

taken the trouble to restart the fire so the passageway was cool at last.

THE Red Guards and the officers pressed closely behind them. Jack moved along the passageway after descending the steps. His captors halted behind him to strike matches. But sure of the route now that he had been through it, Jack led on increasing the distance between himself and the guards.

It was not until he passed the air shaft by the well that they noticed this and came on. An officer shouted after him to halt. He quickly placed Marie in front and called back some indistinct reply, covering several yards more as he did so.

Again came the shouted order to halt, this time accompanied by the click of a breech bolt. A few yards ahead the passage turned.

"Run, darling!" he called to Marie and raced after her.

There was a crash behind them and a bullet spat into the wall at his side just as they turned the corner. The dark passageway reverberated to wild yells as he came to the wooden door and shoved it open, slamming it closed behind him and bolting it.

As the pursuers reached it and began to hammer he struck a match and found that for which he sought, a length of rope hanging down from the wall. This he jerked and heard a crashing, grinding reverberation fill the passageway on the other side of the door, followed by a chorus of wild screams of pain and horror. Those four great logs, poised so precariously above the door, had been placed there for this very purpose.

They were in the treasure chamber at last.

Striking a match he gazed about him in bewilderment. Every piece of silver and all the paintings had been removed since last he had been

there. The *ikon* which concealed the wall cabinet was swung outward.

The silver casket was gone!

"The jewels have been stolen!" cried Marie peering over his shoulder. But there was no time to worry over lesser losses when life itself was at stake.

Outside the door he could hear the survivors who had escaped the fall of the great beams laboring to clear away the debris. Already gun butts were beginning to hammer at the door. It was only a question of minutes until means would be found to break it down.

Jack held Marie fiercely in his arms as he listened to the shouts from outside and saw the door beginning to tremble under the impact of the rifle butts that were smashed against it.

"Ivan says there is a way out of here," he whispered through clenched teeth cursing himself for not having listened more carefully to the whispered words of the old Cossack.

LEAVING Marie, he sought along the wall with his finger testing each crevice in the rock and trying each out-jutting knob of stone, his motions becoming more and more frantic as the door began to splinter. He had nearly completed the circuit of the small chamber by now and a grim despair began to settle around his heart as the solid walls resisted his every effort to find a means of escape.

"Ivan told me to go through the rear exit!" he said savagely, "do you remember any clue to it?"

"No," came Marie's voice in the darkness with a sob at the end.

Jack had two matches left. By now rays of light were coming through the splintered panels of the doorway and the exultant voices of their pursuers could be heard as

they smashed at the splintering wood.

Taking one of his precious matches, he struck it and in the flickering ray cast by its tiny light he noticed that the opening in the wall which had concealed the massive silver box, was large enough to admit the body of a man and that its rear was lost in darkness. A wild hope surged through him as he stumbled for the opening.

Just before the tiny flame went out he saw what he sought, the widening out of a passage which lay beyond the opening.

The light from the lanterns on the far side of the door stabbed fitful rays into the chamber. A hairy arm had reached in through the splintered wood and was tearing away at the bolt. Dragging Marie to him he explained to her swiftly and then lifting her he aided the girl through the narrow opening.

The hairy hand and arm had now found the bolt and was sliding back the iron lock when Jack leaped forward with a bar of wood and struck savagely at it. Turning swiftly before the howl of pain had time to end, he drove straight at the narrow opening in the wall, pulled himself up and crawled through it just as he heard the door behind him fall inwards with a crash.

Marie was ahead of him.

"There are steps here," she called back. In a second he found himself standing on a flight of stone steps that led downwards a few feet, bringing them to level going.

THEY hurried along this, hearing the shouts of their pursuers growing fainter in the rear. Their passage gradually sloped upwards until at last, mixed with the mouldy smell of the place, came the odor of fresh air. That fresh, clean odor was like a taste of water to the

thirsty. If only Ivan Kousmitch had not failed him at the last!

They came to more steps which led them upwards until they found themselves standing above softly lapping water on a tiny platform and the stars shining above them in a well-like opening overhead.

A rope hung down from a cross beam above and a wooden bucket floated half submerged in the water. Jack felt of the stones to the right and found a ladder leaning against the wall. Warning Marie to wait a second he climbed up.

"Hurry, my dear, and be careful, everything is all right!" and his voice came down the well shaft and was echoed back from the water. In another few seconds he was helping her over the coping. Marvelling at the simplicity of this concealment of the exit from the treasure chamber, for who would think to look for it down an old well shaft in the barnyard of a peasant cottage?

IVAN KOUSMITCH was there. Behind him in the shadows were three saddle horses. They pulled up the ladder and concealed it. There was still a faint light from the moon as they mounted and fled down a narrow lane away from the grim and dark farm buildings. Coming at last to the farther edge of the deserted stretch of woods.

"Thank God," breathed Jack, as they came out in a small moor and nearly walked into the trim, low fuselage and shining propeller of a cabin monoplane.

Prince Manulesco, Jack's Roumanian friend, had not failed him.

Prince Manulesco's car was waiting for them when they nosed down out of the sky into the lights of the Bucharest airfield. Ivan Kousmitch, weighted down with their baggage, seated himself by the chauffeur as they sped to the Prince's palace.

It was as they started for their rooms to dress that Marie flung herself into Jack's arms.

MY dear, my dear," sobbed the girl, "I should never have let you go to Russia. What do the jewels matter in comparison to you? But I wish I knew who took them!"

"I told you," Jack said, "of finding that someone had followed me when I first went into the secret passageway, and of striking that unknown person in the dark. I did not tell you that I saw Boris Brodsky for a second when we returned with the Red Guards. And Boris Brodsky had a black eye."

"You mean—?"

"I mean he returned and took the silver and pictures and stole the treasure chest, probably meaning to get out of the country with them himself. But he didn't get much after all," finished Jack carelessly.

Marie shook her head.

"He got forty million francs worth of jewels," she said, "for his treachery—and I—and we—"

"Oh, no he didn't," returned Jack. "Come here Ivan!" and he called the old man who was following them up carrying three sets of saddle bags. Upon investigation the capacious leather sacks proved to be filled with soiled linen, loosely wrapped around a fortune in jewels.

"It was no trick to save these jewels," said Jack. "I carried them out with me on my first visit, and had them on my person when I fought with Brodsky in the darkness. It was Ivan's sister who took them to Ivan when she came to get my laundry. That was simple enough. It was the saving of the most precious jewel of all that had me buffaloed for a minute!"

And they smiled understandingly into each other's eyes.

AZTEC GOLD



*A Tense Breath-Taking Story of a Fierce Battle For
Treasure in the Heart of a Mexican Pyramid*

By ARTHUR J. BURKS

Author of "Dagger of Death," "The Cowled Cobra," etc.

HELL'S BELLS! Here comes Juan!" said slender Jimmy Doyle to stocky Jack Lewis in a tense whisper. "Something must be wrong at the diggings! He must have run all the way from the foothills, at top speed to get here so soon. It was only last night that we left him on guard at—"

"Shh!" cautioned Jack. "Don't mention that place! Walls have ears in this joint!"

The eyes of the two bronzed Americans glanced down the aisle of a cantina in Mexico City. Tables bor-

dered the aisle and people came from the ends of the earth to slake their thirst against new forays into the sun. The city which had known the tragedy of Maximilian and Carlotta, was sweltering.

It had known horror after horror, tragedy after tragedy, joy and sorrow, since Cortez had smashed the power of the Aztecs, and sent the last remnant of them into exile behind their one remaining chieftain, Guatemozin.

History does not say where that exile was but our two adventurous

Americans had dug out a certain secret and now by the look on Juan Soriano's face as he approached, that secret was threatened.

As though shot upward, by twin catapults, Jimmy Doyle and Jack Lewis sprang from their seats and ran to meet Juan. But the sweat-streaked peon who was trying to reach the cantina, failed, because a foot suddenly shooting out had tripped him up, sending him sprawling.

"What the blankety-blank's goin' on here!" shouted Jimmy.

BUT before the two could reach Juan, the man who had tripped him, a chap whose back had been toward them, sprang upon the shoulders of the prone peon, and a gleaming blade in his right hand rose and fell—twice.

Jimmy Doyle, fast on his feet as chained lightning, leaped over the twitching body of Juan Soriano, and hurled himself in pursuit of the man with the knife. Jack Lewis, eyes filled with concern, knelt beside the peon, rolled him to his back.

"Quick, Juan!" he said. "What is it? Why. . . ."

But before Jack could complete his question, Juan Soriano, blood stains on his lips, interrupted hurriedly, because he had little time left, and the agony-sweat beaded his forehead and cheeks.

"Last night in foothills a man—almost naked—wearing a *panache* of plumes—walked across crest of *teocalli* at midnight—I chased him—he melted into nothing. I ran to tell you! Be careful Huitzilo—"

And Juan Soriano, retching, died there, in the arms of one of his masters.

"Pardon, sir," said a harsh voice at Jack's elbow. "Perhaps he has more to say. Force this between his teeth!"

THE voice was grating. Jack raised his eyes to the speaker, who was standing beside a chair at the table where Juan's slayer had been sitting.

He saw a pockmarked face above a grin that, because of snagged teeth, was like the snarl of a lobo. Bare feet, save for Mex sandals. Nationality uncertain, size two inches taller than Jack, fifty pounds heavier. He was extending a filled whiskey glass to Jack.

"Thanks, no," said Jack, "he said enough. . . ."

Then the big stranger's hand came forward and the contents of his glass splashed into the face and eyes of Jack Lewis.

With a cry of pain, Jack reached his feet, pawing the air, while the man who had hurled the liquor into his face flung a dirty *serape* about his shoulders, strode calmly down the aisle, in the opposite direction from that taken by Jimmy Doyle, and lost himself in the crowds which thronged *Calle Cinco de Mayo*.

Then Jimmy came back, panting.

"Lost him," he said. "The dirty murderer ran like a deer. What the devil did Juan want to tell us?"

Jack was almost inarticulate with anger. He started speaking, was halfway through the dying speech Juan Soriano had made, when both became conscious that they were in the midst of a curious crowd which was shouting questions from all angles.

"Call the *policia*," said someone. "Murders are bad for trade."

Juan Soriano was beyond needing help and while it seemed cold-blooded, the two Americans, knowing that they would be held if they waited, forced their way through the crowd and gained the street. They caught a *coche*, ordered the driver to move swiftly, anywhere, and their flight had begun.

It was midday. It would take them twenty hours to travel to the spot whence Juan Soriano had come since sometime just after midnight. Something had happened there. Juan was no baby, peon or not, and didn't frighten easily.

"You know, Jack," said Jimmy, "the description Juan gave you of the midnight visitor made me think of some old woodcuts of Aztec chiefs.—Guatemozin for instance."

"I was thinking the same thing. I don't believe in ghosts. Somebody is wise to what we've found! We've probably been trailed since the beginning. After that dirty buzzard tossed that booze in my face I heard somebody speak a name—Jose Pilar—and I think they meant that bird who tried to drown me. But he was no Mex, and it wasn't just accident those two birds were there when Juan came in."

TWENTY minutes later two Americans, one slender, one stocky, each with a loaded automatic at his waist in a trim holster, each wearing stout riding breeches, boots and sunfoiling *sombreros*, were racing out of the city—once called Tenochtitlan, glorious capital of the Aztecs, criss-crossed by picturesque waterways—toward Jalapa.

The native at the wheel drove like a man possessed. One didn't get fares every day who paid fifty *pesos*.

Two grim-faced chaps, tanned of cheeks, with narrowed eyes which just now emitted sparks, leaned forward in the back seat and urged him to speed and more speed.

They passed a dim road leading off to the left. Jack glanced at it, then looked at Jimmy, who nodded.

Miles ahead of them they saw an oncoming car. They held their own course for two more miles, stopped, climbed out. Jimmy addressed the driver.

"Get back to Mexico City! If you make it as fast as you brought us here, and don't look back, one week from today you can go to the Hotel Colon and collect from us another fifty *pesos*!"

The Mexican grinned, backed around like mad, hurled his car down the road like a racing driver. His own cloud of dust would have prevented his seeing anything if he had looked back.

The other car came up, ground to a stop because it had to stop to keep from bowling over the two men who had planted themselves directly in the road. It was a rickety Ford driven by a black.

"Twenty *pesos*," said Jack without preamble, "if you'll drive us for two hours!"

The black showed his white teeth in a grin.

"For twenty *pesos*," he said, "I would act as pallbearer at my own funeral!"

At the end of two hours, the second car turned back, and its driver had received instructions to go to the Hotel Colon one week from that moment and collect twenty *pesos*—if he did not look back today!

YOU know, Jack," said Jimmy Doyle thoughtfully as the two turned west and struck out in the general direction of a row of distant blue foothills, "we're making promises we may not be able to keep. We may not get back in a week—or two weeks—or ever! There is a lot about this business—the killing of Juan, the escape of his murderer, and the behavior of your pockmarked man, that bothers me—to say nothing of Aztec ghosts; We don't know what may be waiting for us!"

Jack Lewis did not smile. He was not thinking, however, of the *teocalli* Juan had mentioned, nor yet of the Aztec gold which he and Jimmy had

all but located. He was thinking of a humble peon who had been faithful unto death—and beyond—who had died with beads of agony-sweat on his forehead and cheeks—who had forced himself to live until he told his story.

"Funny," said Jack, after an hour of silence, during which the two men had been walking at top speed in the direction of those foothills, "that he should have used those two words—*panache* and *teocalli*—isn't it? He was a peon, and they aren't Spick words."

Jimmy's reply was oddly irrelevant.

"All of which makes me surer than ever that we've made some rash promises about being back in the capital in a week!"

THESE were the last words which passed between them until sundown, when comparative coolness spread over the countryside—and two young Americans who had been, and still were good athletes, broke into a dog-trot which ate up the miles.

In the mind of each was a picture; of a faithful peon who had died in agony striving to tell a strange story of a visitor out of vanished Tenochtitlan of the Aztecs.

A year before, among the hills toward which they were moving, they had found Juan, staked out on an ant-hill, and had got him away in time. He had been eternally grateful in his reticent, somehow stately way.

Then he had heard them speaking of treasure—and had repeated to them certain excerpts from an old legend. He had never told them why he had been staked out, or who had done it.

Juan had been different from other peons they had used. More intelligent. Rather statuesque. But when

he had died, and his brow had been furrowed with pain—

"Damn!" ejaculated Jimmy Doyle. "I can't get Juan out of my mind, and what you say about him using those two words, *panache* and *teocalli*, have got me to fancying all sorts of things!"

"I can't talk much," gasped Jack. "My legs are shorter'n yours, and you're trotting them off of me; but my mind's going bughouse, too! We're going into something, and my guess is that we've *been* in it, ever since we started—that somebody has just been waiting—watching until we—"

But Jack Lewis stopped there. Jimmy was a quick thinker, anyway, and often as not the two talked in fits and starts that no outsider would have understood, but which was perfectly understandable to the two partners. Continuity wasn't necessary where friends were so close they could read each other's thoughts.

So they jogged on, into the night.

BY catching those two rides they had been able to equal the time Juan Soriano had made from the diggings, and it was just a little before midnight when, slowing to a walk, catching their breath, they started down into a secluded, tree-choked valley.

They had in the winking of an eye, almost, dropped the civilized world behind them so irrevocably that it was as though they had stepped into another country, on another continent, entirely.

It was a small valley. Not so much a valley as a pothole of huge dimensions, as though the back of the mountain had sunk in, like the mound of an ancient grave.

Both men drew their weapons, together, as though the same warning had come to them at the same time. No light showed down there among

the trees. Their feet were set in a dim trail that both knew, because for almost a year they had lived, and labored, in this valley below them.

Only short few hours ago they had left, and tragedy, and superstitious terror had invaded the domain they had left behind for a brief period of vacation.

How were the tragedy and terror mixed up?

Both men felt they would find the answer, down there in the valley. As they slipped down, eeling their way through the trees, they stooped forward tensely, the fatigue of their long hike forgotten in the nameless excitement which gripped them as in a vise.

A YELLOW moon peered into the valley, turning all its wild contours into an eerie landscape of blue and gold, and silvery tints. Ethereal, ghostly, it seemed. Jack and Jimmy were accustomed to this valley, and it hadn't bothered them before.

Now, however, it was different. An aura of hidden menace reached up to them, like ghostly, invisible tentacles.

But they did not hesitate.

They reached the bottom, paused to listen—and both shivered. It seemed that all the little valley paused to listen, too.

They raised their eyes to the shadows in a little ravine that cut the valley wall like a scar, a ravine in whose center, some hundred feet or so above the valley floor, a mesa-like rock stood up like a sentinel.

"The *teocalli* is still there," whispered Jimmy tensely.

"Yeah," said Jack, trying to laugh and not succeeding too well, "and it's just about midnight, when ghosts walk!"

Studied at closer range, the mesa-like rock became a pyramid fashioned by human hands. It was around a

hundred feet in height, and as the two friends edged closer to the shadows which shrouded the base of the Aztec bit of architecture, it became evident that had not all trees hereabouts been cleared away recently, the *teocalli*, or pyramid, would have been invisible to passersby.

Observers from airplanes might have seen it, but airplanes, because of sure death in these hills in case of a forced landing, never came this way. It had been a secret place for centuries, and then Jack and Jimmy had found it—because a peon who might have died horribly had been grateful.

How had he known?

Jack and Jimmy had asked the natives everywhere, all sorts of questions, trying to find out the secret of the vanished Aztecs.

NOW, of a sudden, moonlight bathed the bare top of the pyramid.

"Great Scott!" said Jack, grabbing Jimmy by the arm and dragging him closer to the rim of trees about the little clearing. "Look at that!"

For as the moonlight brought the crest of the *teocalli* into sharp relief, a figure seemed to materialize out of the night. The figure advanced to the forward edge of the pyramid, stood there for a second, then raised braceleted bare arms toward the heavens!

A man, almost nude, wearing barbaric ornaments of great splendor—and down his back from the head-dress swept a gorgeous tail of bird-feathers.

"The *panache* of plumes Juan spoke about!" gasped Jack. "But what is he?"

The man stood there like a statue for a second or two, eyes and arms raised, and Jimmy Doyle remembered old pictures he had seen—Aztecs making sacrifices of human hearts to the sun! The conquest of Cortez,

and the passing of the great ones of the Western world.

"But they're gone and forgotten these many centuries!" whispered Jimmy. "And I don't believe in ghosts! He looks like an Aztec chief, but—"

"Nor do I believe in ghosts," said Jack in a natural voice, "I wonder!"

Jack's right hand leaped forward like a darting serpent, cuddling in its palm the butt of his automatic. His finger took up the slack swiftly. He aimed at a spot well above the head of the apparition out of ancient Tenochtitlan.

"I wouldn't, you know!" crackled a voice behind them. "Put up your hands! Drop your weapons! Don't look around! Get their guns, Jose!"

Cold chills bathing their bodies, knowing the menace of death in that grating voice, which Jack at least had good cause to remember, the two friends elevated their arms, and their weapons dropped to the soil at their feet.

Behind them came the pattering sound of feet. Jack Lewis tensed, listening. Jimmy Doyle's eyes were on that bronze apparition at the crest of the *teocalli*. Each of the two friends knew what the other would do, without words passing between them. Jack was short and stocky, but fast when he got in motion.

JIMMY was chained lightning—and his eyes, narrowed now to mere slits, were on that figure at the top of the pyramid. The figure had folded its arms and was peering down into the clearing, calm, stately, apparently in remote contemplation of the doings of strange insects.

"Never mind the acting, Fink!" came the grating voice again. "We've got 'em. Come down and give us a hand."

Then the slithering feet of Jose sounded right behind the two, and

Jack Lewis moved. He moved like a cat, whirling and jumping at one and the same moment. Jimmy knew, without looking around, that Jack had caught Jose flat-footed.

He counted on surprise to stay the trigger finger of the man who had done all the talking so far. He heard Jack move, then he himself was in motion.

He raced toward the steps leading up to the crest of the pyramid. He reached them, started up, taking the steps two at a time—and they were high steps.

The man who wore the *panache* of plumes, swearing good American oaths, was racing down to meet him, hands extended like the talons of a bird of prey.

"Get back, Fink!" shouted the man in the shadows. "I'll wing him! Get back! A ricochet might get you!"

But Fink apparently did not hear, as he fairly leaped from the crest of the *teocalli*, down toward Jimmy Doyle, who gurgled in his throat with joy of the combat to come. Jimmy and Jack were fighters.

Jimmy did not pause in his charge for the moon-bathed crest, and the two men met halfway down, with a shock as of two bulls coming together. Jimmy knew he faced a man with plenty of guts, for the fellow did not hesitate a second to join combat, and he utilized the full value of his superiority of position.

Jimmy was lifted from his feet. Strong arms went around him, and he felt himself falling, falling for a long moment. He tried to drag his assailant under him, so that when the two struck again, he would not be crushed by their combined weight and the momentum of their fall.

BUT Fink knew this, too, and fought off Jimmy's efforts.

Both relaxed at the same time. They struck, and Jimmy felt as

though he had fallen the remaining fifty feet down the face of the pyramid. Every bone in his body seemed jarred from its mooring, while his breath fled from him in a racking gasp.

Jimmy had never been so badly hurt in his life before. But he knew the fellow called Fink had been hurt, too, at least as badly.

So, gritting his teeth on his hurts, he fought at Fink with all his strength. He rained blows into the brown face. Fink clung to him, and his arms were like the jaws of a trap, closing on him inexorably, bending his backbone until Jimmy's eyes were distended with the agony of it.

Jimmy's back was against the forward edge of one of the huge steps, and Fink knew exactly what he was about. Jimmy fought at Fink, until sweat broke forth on his forehead, all over his body, in great beads. He thought of the agony—sweat on the dying face of Juan Soriano—

But still he fought.

A SCREAM came through to his consciousness. Jack Lewis' voice. Jack, then, perfect little fighter, stocky and powerful, had been bested. There had been more than two against him perhaps. Or the chap called Jose, whom Jimmy felt sure was the killer of Juan, had somehow tricked Jack, laid him open to a blow from the muzzle of a revolver.

Black and red dots were dancing before the eyes of Jimmy Doyle. This chap Fink knew what he was doing. He felt Fink's legs pinion his own legs, and realized for the first time that he was dealing with a man who was thoroughly versed in wrestling.

Weakly, and ever more weakly, but with his fighting heart still urging him on, Jimmy Doyle fought against the strangling, back-breaking arms

which were rapidly squeezing him into submission. Perhaps his back *would* be broken. Great scott, the pain—was Jack dead?—was Juan to go unavenged?

With a gasp which was like the rattle in the throat of a dying man, Jimmy Doyle relaxed, crumpling on the steps of the *teocalli*, completely out, bathed in his own perspiration.

"Come on, Jose! Come on Culpepper! I got this one!"

Up to Fink came the grating voice of Culpepper.

"Drag him down here! We've got this one hog-tied!"

Consciousness began to return to Jimmy Doyle just as his captors, who now were half carrying, half dragging him, entered the mouth of the tunnel he and Jack, and Juan Soriano had so patiently cut into the rocky soil on the uphill side of the *teocalli*. The spot had been decided upon by Juan.

He knew when they carried him down the steps to the level where they had started a stope in the direction Juan Soriano, moving as one inspired, had suggested, almost commanded.

JIMMY could hear the stentorian breathing of Jack, and sighed with relief that he still lived. These people had done in Juan, right in a public place, in this country's capital—where punishment in the event of capture would have been certain, speedy, and quite fatal.

They wouldn't hesitate to kill one, or even two others, who interfered with their work.

"They've just waited," Jimmy said to himself disgustedly, "for Jack and Juan and me to do the work!"

Then Jimmy was flung down roughly, and almost had the breath knocked out of him again. Jack stirred and groaned as he was tossed down beside Jimmy. Jimmy decided it was time to speak.

"Well!" he said. "What's the idea? Why keep us tied up like this? Why not bump us off and be done with it?"

The tunnel, which was walled with aged brick, was disclosed, cavern-like, as a light was flashed on. Jose Pilar, a swart Mexican with a jagged scar on his right cheek from an old knife-wound, lighted a lantern.

"Save the batteries of the flash-lights," he said in Spanish. "We'll need them when we find the gold!"

But Culpepper, grinning his snaggle-toothed grin, answered Jimmy.

"This bird Juan told you things," he said. "Things he wouldn't tell us. We want you to repeat what he told you, see? A legend of his people, wasn't it? Well, that legend gives the secret of the exact location of the treasure inside this pyramid! You repeat it for us. We ain't got time to take the whole pyramid apart!"

Jack Lewis had regained consciousness.

"We wouldn't tell you anything, you bloody murderer!" he snapped.

"So say we all of us," said Jimmy grimly, "and so you're the brute that staked Juan out on an ant-hill, eh? Because he wouldn't tell you things!"

CULPEPPER grinned his snaggle-toothed grin, and deliberately kicked Jimmy in the ribs.

"Sure we staked him out! The natives told us, 'talk to Juan, see? He knows things, because he's queer, different from the rest of us.' But he was different, and wouldn't talk. He'd have talked, though, if you two fools hadn't blundered in before the ants tortured him enough.

"Then he took to you, and kept shut about us, holding his own grudge like a Yaqui Indian—and us close enough to drill all three of you! Only we had another hunch, because we know you and us is after

the same thing, see? So we let you do the work—and now here we are!"

"What's the idea of that stuff?" Jack jerked his head toward Fink, stained bronze, almost nude, wearing the *panache* of plumes.

"To scare Juan away, make him come to you! We knew he wouldn't talk, or we'd have grabbed him again. Indians has guts! But he would run to you, and you'd come out to have a look, which you did! We beat you both ways. Any more questions?"

"No," said Jack slowly. "But something to say. We'll see you in Hades before we'll tell you anything!"

"Yeah?" leered Culpepper. "We've busted through inside the pyramid, see? And it's hotter in there than the Hades you talk about. We leave you inside, in total darkness, see? No air—much—you'll talk, all right! But Juan wouldn't. That's why we bumped him. No witnesses, or anybody to bring the Indians onto us."

"Then," said Jimmy Doyle, "you don't intend for us to have a chance to be witnesses, either, after you've found the treasure—if any? You'll finish us like you finished Soriano! You'll bump us anyhow—so sweat us to death and be darned to you!"

Culpepper grinned again.

"We'll leave you in the pyramid," he said, "but unbound, and with a pick and a shovel to dig your way out. It'll delay you until we can make a break."

JOSE PILAR, of the scarred cheek, raising the lantern high, moved ahead, followed by his friends, who helped Jimmy and Jack to stand, and steadied them as they staggered along the tunnel with their captors.

"Blast it, Jack, it looks like curtains; but do you know what makes me really mad? A cutthroat like Fink wearing royal ornaments!"

Fink, without a word, slapped Jimmy heavily on his mouth.

"Cut it, Jimmy," said Jack, "I'm thinking—of something Juan said. Say, Culpepper, is there a statue inside the pyramid?"

"So, you do know, eh? Fine! Our hunch was right, then! And we know you haven't been inside, 'cause we opened up the last of the tunnel ourselves, after we'd scared Soriano away!"

Jack Lewis' eyes were very bright in the glow of the lantern, when now and again Fink or Culpepper snapped on their flashlights.

Air that seared the throat and lungs flowed over the group as Jose Pilar led the way into the pyramid, a huge cavern-like place, tapering up to the top like a funnel, the dome in eternal shadow. Aged bricks and stones made the floor, covered by the dust of centuries.

Rising from the floor, against the wall to the right, was a stone platform, and on the platform, towering to a height of twelve or fourteen feet, was the most hideous, grotesquely horrible figure any of these five had ever seen, even in pictures.

A huge figure, oddly in the shape of a human being, yet unbelievably deformed. Fangs protruded from gaping jaws, while the huge agate eyes, glistening like those of a serpent as they reflected the light from the lantern and the flashlights, seemed to regard these intruders balefully.

"Huitzilo—" began Jimmy Doyle.

"Shut up!" snapped Jack.

Culpepper sprang at Jack, crashed a huge fist to his face, dropping the bound man in his tracks.

"Let him talk, blast you!" he snarled. "What do you think we kept you birds for? Let him talk, or else you talk! Tell us the story Soriano told. Where do we start prying at bricks and things to find this Aztec gold!"

Jack, for answer, spat at Culpepper,

and Culpepper kicked him cruelly in the ribs. At Culpepper's mention of gold, Pilar and Fink seemed to go crazy—and there in the dreadful heat of the heart of the *teocalli*, three gold-mad killers vented their impatience upon two bound men.

JACK and Jimmy fought as best they could. They kicked, butted with their heads; yet ever the fists of Fink, of Pilar, and of Culpepper, slammed into their faces, their noses, and their mouths, until those features were gory messes, and both men, panting in the airless chamber, perspiring from head to foot were more dead than alive.

"Let's tell 'em, Jimmy," groaned Jack.

"No! Don't you see, Jack? They'll get—whatever there is to get—and seal us in here! Tell 'em nothing. They can't find anything, and find it fast, without us. It'll be hell, but the longer we say no the longer we'll live!"

But, beating against the brain of Jack Lewis, like the wings of a bird—of good or evil omen—there kept resounding the last words of Juan Soriano—

"Be careful of Huitzilo—."

"Jimmy," gasped Jack, "I can't stand it any more! I'd rather die fast than take any more of this! They've got us foul!"

"I haven't the breath to tell the legend, Culpepper; but here's what it means; there's a brick right in the center, in front, of that ugly statue there, which moves. Find it and pull it out. The rest of the bricks which form the front of the Aztec vault will come out easily then. Go to it, and I hope you kill each other over the dough!"

"Thanks, you guys," leered Culpepper. "I'd bump you now, but I wanta be sure this is straight! And after all, your own idea about lock-

ing you up in this dump rather appeals to me! We'll get the dough—and we may even let you look at it—and then, say, it is hot in here, ain't it?"

"Come on, Cul!" yelled Pilar and Fink.

Excitement, gold-lust, possessed the three. They raced together to the face of the idol, and clawed frantically at the front of the stone dais upon which it rested. The faceted eyes of the thing seemed to follow them, balefully.

"Watch the statue, Jimmy!" whispered Jack. "I forgot to tell you Juan's last words. They didn't mean anything until I got to mulling them over!"

Jimmy Doyle gasped, and peered through the gloom to study the grotesque image on the dais, at the base of which, like mad pygmies, the three killers, their prisoners forgotten in their excitement, clawed like maniacs.

Was it fancy, or did the eyes of the statue peer more straightly down upon the defilers?

A scream from Pilar.

"Here it is! I've found it! Stand back a minute! Don't crowd! We'll all look in together! We're—"

A YELL from Jimmy Doyle, a yell which came too late. Pilar dragged the stone out, with a rasping sound. His two partners crowded close against him, clawing at the opening, blind to all else save the potential treasure within the ages-closed vault under the statue.

A tremendous roar shook the *teocalli* on its foundations. Fine dust stung the nostrils of Jimmy and Jack. The lights were out, and darkness that was almost absolute possessed the heart of the pyramid. Then—silence, utter and complete, empty of the voices of Culpepper, of Fink, and of Pilar.

"Jimmy," said Jack in a voice that strove for naturalness, "when the statue started forward it was all I could do to keep from warning them—but they were so mad for treasure they wouldn't have heard, anyway! I'll bet the thing weighed ten tons! It got all three of them—couldn't help it. It took the darned thing an age to topple forward! Juan was right—"

"But what did Juan tell you that you didn't tell me, Jack?"

"He said, 'Be careful of Huitzilo.'— Then he died before he could finish. But he meant—"

YEAH, I get it now, for I recognized the Aztec god Huitzilo-pochtli, when I saw him! Let's get loose, and get out of here! I don't want to come back! I don't want any Aztec treasure! It's bad luck!"

"But," said Jack, tiredly working at Jimmy's bonds, which were loosening slowly because Jack was bound too, and his fingers stiff and bleeding behind his back, "Juan went to a lot of trouble for us to get this secret. I'd sort of—sort of—well, I've a hunch maybe he'd like to be buried in this joint. We'll bring him here, and seal the place up again.

"We'll seal up his secret, too—the secret of how he knew such Aztec words as *panache*, and *teocalli*—and then—Maybe, after all, we'll take a look from the top of the platform, into the hole upon which Huitzilo has been sitting since the Aztec exiles fled from the butchers of Cortez!"

"Yes," said Jimmy, his hands now free, beginning to work on the bonds which held Jack, "we should have something for what we've gone through, and Juan—I wonder what his *real* name was—wouldn't mind, or he wouldn't have warned us!"

The Devil Dancers



Two Marines Set Loose a Cavalcade of Machetes and Muscles in a Barbacoa Hut and Spike a Revolution

By JOHN EASTERLY

Author of "Shen of the Seven Seas," "The Winding Trail," etc.

LIEUTENANT STEVE RANKIN was reading a letter from Headquarters in the Capital City. "With the date of total evacuation of the province approaching," ran the letter, "I don't like you to remain any longer in Barahona than is absolutely necessary. Never can tell what's in the minds of the natives. They want the marines to leave, and again they don't, and you've only a handful with you.

"A bit of concerted action on their

part, and your detachment would be wiped off the map. Barahona is against, so we hear from underground channels, the Presidential candidate approved by the United States, and has grown sullen. . . ."

Steve had heard a lot of the same before. The Old Man at the Capital was prone to shy at shadows, especially where his Marines were concerned.

Well, some of the natives *had* been a little ugly. Especially in

Barahona itself, which had been uniformly friendly to the Marines from the very first. That new *guardia* captain, who had relieved the Marine officer in charge of the *guardia* detachment. Felt his onions, sort of, and kind of prone to try to run Barahona in spite of Steve's authority, which still extended into the future a couple of months.

OR, at least, until Steve and his men were finished with their military map of the province. Twenty men he had out. Ten going south to Cabo Beatta, mapping all the area south of Lake Enriquillo, ten north of the lake and north, generally speaking, of Barahona itself.

They'd soon be finished. Thirty days at the outside.

The lieutenant, a stocky, rosy-cheeked kid who looked like, and had been, a crack football player, wasn't much afraid of the natives, and had his own ideas about their ability to fight. Besides, his men stood by him loyally.

A shadow darkened the door of Steve's office, in the shade of the palm grove at the edge of Neiba Bay, and Steve looked up.

The man who entered was as black as a houseful of Haitians, and he wore the uniform of the *Guardia Nacional Dominicana*. He had a sullen look on his face, his hands were in his pockets, and he failed to give Steve the customary courteous salute.

The fellow was an orderly. He'd been in Steve's office a hundred times at least, and never yet had failed in the courtesies. It was an omen.

"Well," said Steve in Spanish, "what's wrong now? And you might take your hands out of your pockets and stand at attention; not that I care, but it looks more military."

STEVE had no expectation that the sullen orderly would take the hint, and so wasn't in the least bit disappointed when he didn't.

"Captain Mendoza wants you to report to his office at once!" snapped the orderly.

"Did he send his compliments, or anything like that?" said Steve softly, while his grizzled old top sergeant looked at the orderly as though he'd like to take him apart and was only prevented by the presence of Steve.

"Why should he?" said the orderly insolently. "He's a captain, while you're a mere lieutenant."

"And he wishes to see me?"

"He said nothing of wishes. He said you were to report to his office at once!"

Mendoza was the new commandant of the Guardia Detachment at Barahona.

The orderly waited, still with his hands in his pockets.

"Top soldier!" barked Steve.

It ripped through the dead silence like an exploding hand grenade.

And the old sergeant snapped into it; he also snapped the orderly out of it. In two shakes that dusky lad was standing stiffly at attention and had saluted so many times he was wet with perspiration. Steve had meticulously returned every salute.

"Now, lad," said Steve coolly, when the instruction had been brought to a period, "go back and tell the *capitan* where my office is, and that if he wishes to see me he'd better come here! No, I guess you'd better make it an order. Tell him I'll give him ten minutes!"

THE orderly fled precipitately, while the top sergeant grinned appreciatively. When exactly ten minutes had passed, Steve said:

"Tell the sergeant of the guard,

Finn, to go to the office of His Excellency, *Capitan* Mendoza, and escort him here to my office. Tell him he'd better take a couple of men with him. Can't hand out too much courtesy to these new *guardia* officers."

In five minutes by the clock, followed by two men with fixed bayonets, Captain Mendoza, his naturally dusky face a beet red with fury, strode into Steve's office. Steve rose to meet him, saluting gravely, and motioned Mendoza to a chair, waving the sentries away.

"Well, *Capitan*," said Steve, "this is indeed a pleasure! It is seldom indeed that you come to see me. What can I do for you, sir?"

Mendoza almost exploded. He sputtered like a dud fire-cracker.

"I'd have you to know I'm a captain!" he roared. "I'd have you to know I'm your senior by two grades! I'd have you to know I'm the new detachment commander at Barahona!"

"I know all that, Captain," said Steve soothingly; "but I understand you wished to see me about something?"

MENDOZA, seeing that he could gain nothing by trying to bluff stocky young Rankin, smiled grimly.

"I understand you are going to La Descubierta tomorrow morning," he stated, "and I wish to give you a word of advice. Don't molest the *guardia* outposts, don't stop at Barbacoa, and don't ask any favors of the natives. I won't tolerate any meddling on the part of American officers in my province!"

"Sorry," said Rankin. "I didn't know you had purchased the province! Anything else?"

"Stay away from Barbacoa!"

"Where's Barbacoa?"

"Between Neiba and La Descubierta."

"Never heard of the place, but since you've spoken about it, I may drop in to get acquainted."

"At your peril!" almost screamed Mendoza. "I told you to stay away from Barbacoa!"

"If you hadn't mentioned it, I'd never have known of the place. What's wrong with Barbacoa? Anything? Nothing? All right, captain, close the door on the outside and get this: never send for me to come to your office!"

In the cool of the following evening, Steve Rankin, with a pharmacist's mate riding a second mule beside him, was trotting roughly westward from the village of Neiba toward La Descubierta, where his mapping detail north of Lake Enriquillo was awaiting his coming.

A HEAD of Steve and the pharmacist's mate rode two *Guardia*, a corporal and a private, and they had been the soul of courtesy to Steve, which had caused him to smell a huge, demised and exceedingly decomposed rat.

Last time he'd been through, they'd tried to treat him as the dirt under their feet, and hadn't succeeded only because he had ignored them as though they had been the dirt under his.

"Doc," said Steve to the pharmacist's mate, "let's stop at Barbacoa and see what's toward. Mendoza, back at Barahona, warned me away from the place, and with the natural perversity of the *genus homo*, I'm honing to find out why."

"Just as you say, Lieutenant," replied the mate, "but I'm a non-combatant myself, being a medical man, and I don't like black men with knives."

So the four men, riding their long-eared, rangy mules, trotted along through the gathering dusk toward La Descubierta, and when the

guardia cabo and his *raso* turned aside into the trail to Barbacoa of their own accord, he smelled the rodent above referred to with more surety.

The four mules clattered into the single street of the odorous little town. The village sprawled at the edge of the jungle between Lake Enriquillo and the Cordilleras, and was about as smelly as are most native villages.

They were met by the *alcalde*, or mayor, of the place, who smiled expansively and held up a black hand to Steve. His breath was redolent of cheap rum.

HE had spoken a few words with the corporal and private of *guardia*, who had ridden on ahead of Steve and the medico.

"The town is yours, *teniente*," he said expansively, "and I've arranged for a dance in your honor. I wish you to remain the night here. La Madre, the little town across the creek there, is our mortal enemy, and her people have threatened to break up our dance—"

"How did you know I was coming?" demanded Steve.

The *alcalde* waved his arms, shrugged his shoulders. The gestures might have meant anything. The *guardia* soldiers, some distance away, were the center of a huge group of natives, and now and then all looked toward Rankin.

"Looks like a warning of trouble, Doc," said Steve. "You can slide on toward La Descubierta, if you like. I don't wish these *cafe-con-leche* chaps to bluff me."

"Nor I," said the medico quietly, dismounting.

Later that night, after a toothsome *san coche* prepared by the wife of the *alcalde*, all Barbacoa, making little or no noise, repaired to the biggest hut in the place.

The *alcalde* took charge of things. He was expansive, verbose and loud. He seemed the native hail-fellow-well-met. The two native soldiers, grinning at nothing, as though they enjoyed a secret jest, sat well apart from Steve and the pharmacist's mate.

THE dance began. The hut filled with natives. Men wore their hats and danced in their bare feet. Women smoked foot-long black cigars and danced in their bare feet, and no couple utilized more than two feet or floor space for their dancing.

White rum in big bottles circulated freely.

The *alcalde* did the honors. There was one glass, and a hundred dancers. Men and women drank. The air in the place was like the air from a furnace. The dancers perspired freely. The orchestra was a tom-tom, a squeaky accordion and a potato grater across which the player dragged a rasp with great gusto.

The white bottle approached Steve and his companion. He noted as the *alcalde* approached that the glass was grimy, smudged with fingerprints and lip prints. The dancers were being treated ahead of the guests.

The *alcalde* was jovial. He stopped before the pharmacist's mate, whose stomach was none too good anyway, since he'd been down but four months—spit on the floor, poured a generous portion of rum into the filthy glass, drank it at a gulp, poured another three fingers and held it out to the medico.

Steve reached forward to kick the medico on the shins. But he was too late. His face as pale as ashes, the pharmacist's mate shook his head, drawing back from the *alcalde*.

Instantly that official turned, signaled to the orchestra, which stopped at once, freezing the dancers in their places.

"We have been insulted, *compadres!*" shouted the *alcalde*. "These Americans are too good to drink with us!"

SEVERAL things happened then with great suddenness. Out of the darkness beyond the open door of the dancehall whizzed a silver streak of light.

The pharmacist's mate's campaign hat jumped backward off his head, and hung itself on the wall behind him, while the knife which had pinned it there, driven into the wood a full two inches, quivered angrily.

Every woman in the place seemed to vanish on the instant. They went through the doors and windows and under the walls where there were holes big enough to squeeze through.

The two *guardia* officials went for their guns. Steve's automatic spoke twice, close together. The *guardia* dropped their weapons, grabbed their bleeding hands. The *alcalde* started for the door, stopped and turned back at Steve's command to halt.

"Can you fight with your fists, Doc?" demanded Steve.

"Try me!" snapped the pharmacist's mate. "I never did like to drink after other folks anyway. They might have some germs I wouldn't care about!"

The natives, faces sullen, began to edge in upon the two Americans, whose backs were to the wall, side by side. Steve holstered his weapon. The natives' hands rested on the inevitable machetes at their belts.

Steve put his right foot against the wall at his back, noted that the mate did likewise, grinned his satisfaction—and then the fun started, even as a familiar voice sounded from outside.

"Stop! Stop! What's going on here?"

"Come in and see!" yelled Rankin, launching himself forward by kicking against the wall with his right foot.

As Steve sprang forward, the pharmacist's mate sprang forward, too. The arms of both of them were flailing out. Steve's right fist crashed to the jaw of the *alcalde* with all the power in his stocky body. He had reasons why he did not wish the *alcalde* to leave the place.

The *alcalde* didn't.

He sank to the floor in a crumpled heap, and the fight which followed was waged over his body and around it.

Steve's fist smacked into the face of the nearest of the erstwhile dancers, and the man went down. The others had their machetes out now, and the guttering candles which lighted the place shot streaks of silver from their murderous blades.

"Cut down the fool *Americanos!*" was the cry. "Chop them to bits and throw their bodies into Lake Enriquillo to the alligators!"

A MACHETE came whizzing downward toward the face of Steve. He ducked aside, grabbed the wrist of the assailant, snapped it across his knee, and the machete clattered to the floor.

Steve grabbed it up, kept a circle free about himself as he whirled it for a moment, giving the pharmacist's mate a chance to rid himself of the two men who had climbed on his back.

Steve tossed the machete to the mate.

"Stand over the orchestra," he snapped. "Make them keep playing! I've an idea La Madre may turn out in force to hear the music, and I'd like to know exactly what is going on here!"

"So would I, *teniente!*"

Steve whirled to look toward the door, in which stood Mendoza, smiling sardonically, his right hand holding a service automatic trained on Steve Rankin. Steve dropped flat to the ground.

Mendoza fired as Steve moved, and his bullet plunked into the stomach of the man beyond Steve. Steve came up swiftly, grabbed the smallest man within reach, hurled him full at Mendoza, who crashed to the doorsill with the man across his knees.

Steve was on him in an instant, just as the orchestra, keeping badly out of tune, led by the mate who flourished the machete as though it had been a conductor's baton, broke into music again, the tum-tumming of the tom-tom crashing out into the night.

STEVE whirled back. The natives were massing again, close together, their machetes weaving back and forth in their hands as they waited for him to move.

"Make the buzzards play, Doc!" shouted Steve. "Watch Mendoza, too! If he starts away, crown him with the flat of that machete!"

Steve's right hand pawed at the automatic and wrenched it free from its holster. The muzzle swept the ebony crowd.

"Now you guys," he thundered in Spanish, as he backed against a wall. "Toss your machetes out here on the floor . . . or . . ."

And he glanced down at the instrument of death in his hand.

The natives hesitated, eyeing the man backing up the weapon.

"And remember," went on Steve, "it'd be kinda dangerous to toss 'em too near me. Understand?"

Apparently they did for they stood there looking 'dumber than usual. Steve hadn't intended resorting to this—but the odds were too great. . . . Too much throat-slitting ap-

paratus against a couple of fists, even if they were Marine fists.

One undersized black started the procession. He flung his machete to the open floor space in front of Steve and heaved a prodigious sigh, as if he was losing a tried and trusted friend. And the others, like sheep, followed . . . the knives clanging and clanking as they landed.

Steve grinned and ran his fingers through his rumpled hair.

"That all?" he asked, as the cold steel display in front of him ceased to increase.

He looked the sullen crew over and decided that, maybe, that was all. But there was always the chance that some giant black might be concealing one of those portable guillotines somehow, somewhere. . . and waiting the opportunity to slake the steel's thirst for a Marine's blood.

But that was the chance he must take.

STEVE moved forward, slipping his automatic back into the holster. At his feet were strewn the disorderly array of native persuaders. He stooped swiftly, seized a machete, whirled, and hurled it through the open door into the darkness. Another followed, its blade shimmering.

The crowd of natives blinked their astonishment and their musical brothers shivered and played louder, wilder, each man for himself. And the knife-throwing act went gaily on.

"I haven't," said Steve to Steve, as one of the few remaining machetes left his hand, "missed that door yet!"

When the last one had gone swirling out to be instantly swallowed by the inkiness, Steve straightened up.

Now, you black devils," he said, addressing the awed natives. "You're going to get that fight you were yapping about . . . and like it. Only we'll use fists!"

And at that he charged forward at the mass, his fists flailing out. The natives were swept back like the Red Sea by that terrific assault . . . all but two. One's paunchy tummy stopped the Marine's left fist.

He sank down gasping and gurgling for breath. The other unfortunate took it on the chin from a T. N. T.-packed right. Without a murmur of protest he folded up quite gracefully—his patron saint evidently deciding that, after all, he wasn't cut out for such primitive fighting.

And then their comrades fully awakened to the peril in their midst, closed in on Steve on all sides.

THE lieutenant dived suddenly and grabbed two natives about their ankles, came up swiftly, upsetting them heavily among their own.

The mate leaped away from the orchestra, the natives playing as though their lives depended upon it, the whites of their eyes rolling, big as saucers in their black faces—and smacked reviving Captain Mendoza on top of the head.

This done to his satisfaction—he wasn't sure but that Mendoza *had* moved, and didn't care to take any chances!—the mate resumed his conductorship of the orchestra.

Two natives came charging wildly at Steve from either side. The Marine side-stepped quickly, and the two, before they could realize what had happened, collided heavily.

Steve sprang back, grabbed each by the throat and whirled them around before him, so that their backs were toward each other. And then, with a crash that could be heard in La Madre, he smacked their heads together.

"I should kick you on the shins," he said, as he dropped them to the floor, "but I've got corns! A little more pep from the orchestra, Doc!"

Steve was more or less berserk

now. At the start of the riot one fellow had cut his shirt half off at the waist, with a wild swing of a machete, and had made a neat furrow from right to left across Steve's brawny chest.

The sweat ran into the red, bleeding weal, and its salt ate into Steve like acid. But it only served to make him madder even than before.

"I only wonder," he mused, as he whirled like a dervish, his arms flailing, his hair all awry, his campaign hat a rumpled mess on the floor under the fighters, "what all the shooting is for. If the *alcalde* and Mendoza don't come to and cop a sneak before I finish this here dance, I'll find out, too!"

Steve was now in the center of a milling, obscenely swearing mass of natives, who swung their fists with careless disregard of their *compadres*. As he fought Steve utilized all his knowledge, gleaned from long months as a physical instructor during the War, of rough-and-tumble fighting.

One man, twice as big as Steve, gave the Marine a moment of panic. He had obtained a machete from some place and was swinging it like a veteran who must have cut his teeth on the thing.

The huge knife carrier dropped like a punctured toy balloon when the forefinger and middle finger, held stiffly together, of Steve's right hand, were buried almost to the wrist in the native's solar plexus.

HE fell, and Steve caught his weapon before it hit the hard dirt of the floor. And another machete flashed out the door into darkness.

"I hope," muttered Steve, "that no more of the black hombres are guilty of carrying concealed weapons."

The orchestra, drowning in its own perspiration, played valiantly on, superintended by the mate, who was

grinning his enjoyment, patently itching to get into the fracas, held to his ludicrous post by his superior's command to keep playing.

Captain Mendoza opened his eyes, raised his head. Steve darted out of the fracas, but the mate beat him to it. His improvised baton swung down and Mendoza closed his eyes.

ONE man charged Steve. Steve sidestepped neatly, clipped the man under the chin. The native fell, spilling two others.

Four men left. The mate kept an eagle eye on the door, in which could now be seen a sea of black faces; but nobody came in. Perhaps these chaps were from La Madre, and were tickled to see the Barbacoans getting theirs.

At any rate, they did not come in, and when Steve slammed a savage right, backed by all his strength, to the tummy of the biggest of the men remaining, catapulting him through the door, the folks in the door respectfully opened up to let the flying man through.

Steve started chasing the remaining four Barbacoans who, their tongues lolling out like curs which have been racing long-winded jack-rabbits, were now content to keep away from this bloody-faced, hard-fisted fool *Americano*, and one by one he ran them down.

The mate dripped salty perspiration now, for the machete with which he beat time was heavy.

Two more natives down!

With a savage right-hander Steve dropped the next to the last of his antagonists. With an even more savage left, he dropped the last of them. Then he stopped, flung the sweat out of his eyes, flipped the blood from his fingertips.

Steve went through the pockets of the fallen. He got a flat bottle of *ron carta blanca* from the hip pocket

of one chap's blue denim trousers, and forced a few drops between the lips of the *alcalde*, who sat up as though a hot poker had been forcibly applied to his bare feet.

"I know it's rotten stuff, *alcalde*, my boy," said Steve, who had by now regained some of his wind and a bit more of his sense of humor, "but it'll do you a heap of good!"

The *alcalde* sat there until Steve had forced a few drops of the fiery liquid between the tight-closed lips of Captain Mendoza, then both came erect when Steve assisted them by grasping the seats of their respective trousers.

He had his own weapon in his right hand, while his left held the weapon which, to date the mate had had no use for, and these he thrust, muzzle foremost, into the respective backs of Mendoza and the *alcalde*.

"Now gents," he said, "unless you want me to make a couple of holes through each of you, so that friends you meet can look into you and see what makes you tick, you'll lead me to wherever it is you keep the stuff."

Now, Steve hadn't the slightest idea where the "stuff" was, nor what it was, but that there was "stuff" of some kind he was mortally certain, else Mendoza had never told him to keep away from Barbacoa in the first place.

MENDOZA and the *alcalde*, strode into the darkness, their steps lagging now and again, yet gathering new strength as though by a miracle when the muzzles of the automatics smacked into their backs, stopped at length before a long, rambling building, which Mendoza, almost crying, opened wide.

"*Alcalde*," said Steve, "go on in and light a candle. If you try anything funny in there in the dark, I'll let daylight through Mendoza."

A candle broke into flame inside, another and another.

Steve gasped as he stepped over the sill, hazing his two charges.

At a rough guess, there were fifteen hundred rifles in that room, and a dozen huge cases of ammunition for same!

"Enough," said Steve, whistling amazedly, "to start a grand revolution. No wonder Mendoza ordered me to stay away! Eh, *Capitan*? And to think I wouldn't even have come here if you hadn't been so bumptious!"

"What?" roared the *alcalde* whirling on Mendoza. "You gave the show away?"

MISERY written heavily on his face, Mendoza said nothing. He didn't have to.

"Captain," said the *alcalde*, "I must remind you that your Barahona command has, of a sudden, become a very unhealthy one for you! When Pelez, who spent five thousand dollars on this arsenal, finds out what you've done, he'll be very angry!"

"Thanks, *alcalde*," said Steve, "for giving me the name of Pelez!"

It was the *alcalde's* turn to fall silent, Mendoza's chance to straighten his shoulders resolutely.

Steve herded the two back to the dancehall, where the orchestra still played, and where the men he had downed were sitting up here and there, wagging jaws to make sure none was broken, and looking exceedingly foolish and uncomfortable.

"Need another man, Doc," said Steve. "You go down to the lake shore and keep the working detail moving! I'm going to start a young arsenal toward the lake, a bit at a time, on the backs of these rough-and-ready huskies, who are would-be revolutionists. See that the arms are rowed out into deep water, and that all boats come back empty!"

IN the wee sma' hours of the morning, tired to death, dragging one foot after the other as though it weighed a ton, Steve and the mate turned in, in two hammocks in the house of a servile, vociferously apologizing, *alcalde*—and slept instantly, not even taking the precaution of closing the outer door.

They had accomplished much.

The long, rambling house was empty of rifles and ammunition, and these now reposed far down on the bottom of Lake Enriquillo.

Back in Barahona, thirty hours later, Steve bethought himself of the letter of worry he had received from his superior in the Capital City.

"Have to answer it, Top, I guess," he said to his grizzled old first sergeant, who grinned at him.

STEVE started pecking out his letter on the decrepit typewriter.

"My dear Colonel," he wrote, "I feel that you are worried needlessly. The province is as quiet as can be. Practically nothing worth reporting, except that we are progressing rapidly with the military map, ever happens here. . . ."

Here Steve stopped. He yawned.

"Ho, hum, Top," he said, "guess I'll answer that letter tomorrow. I'm sleepy, and there's no hurry anyhow. If Mendoza calls while I'm asleep, tell him to wait. I'll only sleep about nine or ten hours, and he won't mind! Gosh, I wonder how that *baile* at Barbacoa would have turned out if the pharmacist's mate hadn't refused that white rum, if Mendoza hadn't ordered me to keep away, and if—say, Top, that *alcalde's* wife can cook *san coche* to the Queen's taste! Ain't it nice to be a Marine?"

"Yes, *isn't* it?" replied the top sergeant, thus delicately hinting to his superior that there ain't no such word as ain't.

Conclude this Thrill-Giving Serial Novel

The RED HAWK of the RIO

A Three Part Serial

By EDGAR L. COOPER

PART III

SYNOPSIS

Tex Tolliver, of the Slash-T Rancho, thirty miles north of the Rio Grande, is a cattle-baron, free-lance adventurer and gunslinger. His companion, Ken Curry, is one of the fastest guns on the Rio.

Tolliver, known as King Tolliver for his mastery of aviation, and Curry hear the news of a great ghost ship flying over the Rio Grande country and spreading havoc.

It is generally believed that a half-maniac young Mexican, de Allende, is the night rider.

Efforts to capture the mad pilot fail.

Tex decides to take a hand in the matter. He employs the hexagon motored plane, The Red Hawk, which he owns, for his purposes. With Ken Curry he makes secret plundering trips into Mexican territory.

The mysterious night rider is blamed, and now two countries are on his trail. Tex is quite satisfied that he has paved the way for the capture of the maniac, now that Mexico as well as America is indignant.

But, sleeping the sleep of one who has done his work well, he is suddenly awakened



by a vise-like grip of fingers gagging his mouth. A sharp knife is at his throat!

It is de Allende who traps him, takes him to a plane, and ties him up inside the cabin. Unconscious of time or direction, Tex is transported in the plane to de Allende's Mexican home.

While Ken Curry and others are in a feverish search for the abducted aviator, Tolliver is de Allende's prisoner and guest. After a long sleep he is awakened by de Allende and invited to partake of dinner.

As Tolliver is eating, Allende leans forward, hands on the table, his face transformed into an animal snarl.

"Eat well," he commands. "Eat well, for it will be your last food on earth!"

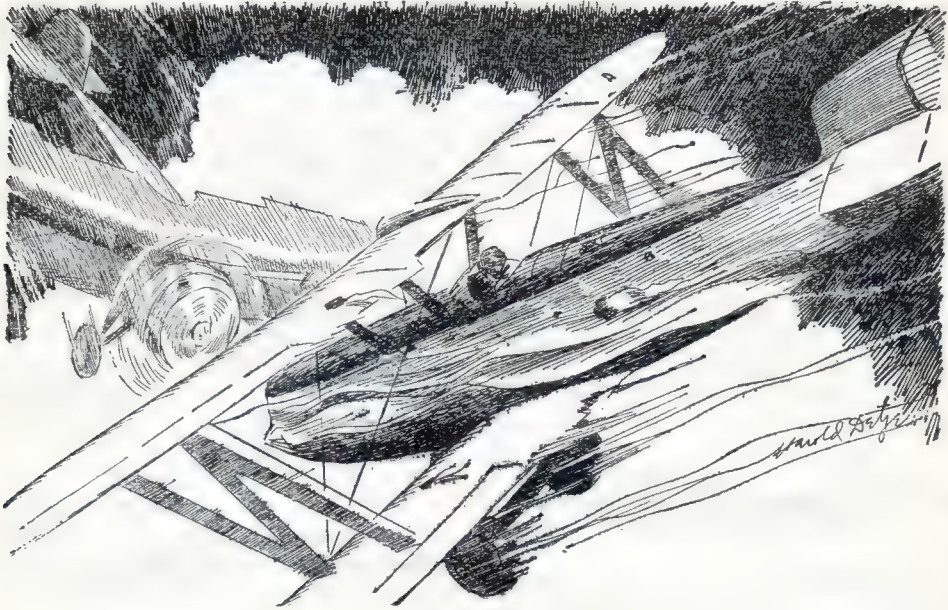
Now Go On With the Story.

TEX did not flinch at the hurled words, the hot savagery of tone and face. His features were impassive; poker cold.

"In that case," he replied quietly, "I think I'll have Chongito refill my coffee cup."

Faustino de Allende wiped a fleck of foam from the corner of his mouth with a silk handkerchief, and sat back in his chair as if suddenly very tired. The insane glare died out of his eyes as he fumbled for

of Air Adventure in Mexico and America



a cigarette, leaving them filmed and dead as a cobra's.

His fingers, none too steady, rolled a corn-shuck cigarette, and Tex knew that the sack of *Lobo Negro* tobacco contained half *marijuana*. Under the influence of that weed the Garrote would soon be capable of any villany, bar none.

TEX studied the man across from him impersonally as he finished his coffee. A strikingly handsome fellow, save for that disfiguring scar and those snake eyes under their scant, almost imperceptible brows. He looked every inch a picturesque Spanish *charro* in his silk shirt, English whipcord riding breeches and officer's Cordovan boots. His face was fresh shaven, his raven hair parted and slicked back with pomade, his shirt open at the neck. Diamond cuff links glistened at his wrists, and around his waist was

buckled a cartridge belt and holster of hand-tooled Mexican workmanship, the latter holding a squat Colts automatic.

His fingers drummed restlessly on the table and his eyes were veiled in absent thought as he slowly puffed on the hemploaded cigarette, Tex apparently forgotten. The two *cholos*, squatted by the coals, wolfed their dinner and conversed in low voices, their beady eyes roving over the pair at the table.

Tex, finished, shoved back his empty cup and slowly twisted a Bull Durham brownie. There were many things he was wondering about, curious of—he intended to ask a few questions himself in the forthcoming confab when Allende “got down to cases.” This hombre wasn’t suffering from any brain pressure or insanity caused by a fall; that was dead sure.

Yet he had something far worse,

the hemp yen. He had the cunning of a devil, the disposition of a hundred devils. And Tex didn't doubt in the least but that he had some fiendish mode of death all planned to a nicety for him.

Allende brought his attention back to his guest with a start—tossed away his stub of cigarette with a shrugged smile.

"Your pardon, *amigo*," he said lightly. "I was thinking of a certain patio in Torreon, and of a very beautiful señorita who dwells there. Tomorrow, perhaps, I will fly over to that pretty city. Yes, assuredly I shall. My supply of wines is getting low, and the cellars of *Quinta de Allende* are well stocked with the grapes of Spain and France. Fly my own plane, of course—the Wasp you voyaged in last night—

YOU are through? Finished? Can I eat no more? *Bueno*." He rose to his feet, strode off toward his rock chamber with a careless step that masked the latent energy of his lithe body. "This way," he said brusquely.

Plenty of light filtered through the cavern entrance, making a lantern unnecessary. The two took seats opposite each other at the table, with matches, cigarettes and tobacco on the board between.

The *Garrote* placed his *marijuana* and corn-shuck papers at his elbow, tilted back his chair and rested his slender, booted ankles upon the table, locking his fingers behind his head. He narrowed his lids against the curling smoke of his second shuck cigarette.

"Listen to a little story, Señor Tolliver," he began, his words silky as the purr of a puma. "Once upon a time there was a man who made his name a thing of fear and hatefulness up on the border country. To a great many persons he did

that. He owned a big hacienda, many acres, thousands of cattle. He was rich, hard-boiled, a gunman—the fastest gun on the Rio, so it is said. He had a super-ship—a red sky bird that spread terror to smuggler and bandit in all the mesquite country, and many, many people knew him as the red killer of the cactus.

"*El Halcon Rojo*, The Red Hawk. And with him tailed his shadow, a former outlaw and *buscadero* who is just one whit less fast with his pistols. This man, this Red Hawk, dealt himself a hand in a certain game—built it himself, a loop to snare a certain party. He made himself most obnoxious, unpleasant; has caused that certain party some embarrassment by luring Mexican officialdom in the *Ciudad* to take action. How he did that you are well aware of. Do I make myself clear?"

PERFECTLY," said Tex calmly. "It was my aim and intention to get you in dutch with Ciudad Mexico with my raids—perhaps bait you over the Zaragoza where you could be attended to. I figured on your curiosity regarding my dropped demand for ten thousand pesos."

"Quite so," replied Allende dryly. "I have a radio set, you see, and it picks up many broadcasting stations, both in the States and Mexico. Dovetailing all facts, it did not take me long to find out that one person, and one person alone, was responsible for bombing Zaragoza and blowing up railway bridges. You, Señor Tolliver, are the only man north of the river who would dare such a scheme.

"I gave you warning to keep hands off, and attend to your own business, that first night I flew across the Rio. Polite warning, for I didn't try to hit your casa with that bomb, nor your hangar. I be-

lieved a word to the wise sufficient. It was not, obviously. It needed drastic measures to convince you, the feared Red Hawk! So instead of flying back and blasting your belongings off the map of Texas, I chose to make an example of you in the certain way I shall. And a very warning example it will be to other meddlers, señor!"

Tex shrugged; twisted another quirly as Allende fashioned a third *marijuana*. Things were clearing up fast. "Since I'm to furnish the example," he said, "do you mind if I ask questions?"

NOT at all," replied the Mexican. "Any you choose. If I can answer them, I will."

"Good," nodded Tex. "What about that note demanding a slice of the Lone Star ceded back to Mexico? You serious about that?"

"Never more so," said Allende promptly. "That territory was taken from us unfairly, unjustly. It is a rich province." He got up, went to the map on the wall, motioning Tex to follow. "See here," he pointed out, facing Tex and using the blunt nose of his automatic to trace his words.

"A strip 100 miles deep, from the Rio northward, all the way from El Paso to Point Isabel. The Pecos River, from the New Mexico line to the east of Fort Stockton, would be the northwest frontier. Then it would continue northeast through Sonora, Bandera, San Antonio—then to the Guadalupe River above the town of Cuernavaca, where the eastern frontier would follow that stream to the Gulf at Matagorda Island. A perfectly logical boundary, from tip to tip. Geographically perfect."

You said one hundred miles north," reminded Tex dryly. "That territory you sketched em-

braces much more than that distance."

"Ah, yes," smiled de Allende. "One hundred miles was my first demand. This is my last. A better, more natural frontier. They will be glad to hand it over before I am finished, señor. It will make a wonderful province, and I will be its Governor-General, with my capital in San Antonio. My campaign of conquest is just begun."

Tex laughed as one frankly enjoying a joke.

"Hogwash!" he remarked.

Two veins in the forehead of Faustino de Allende stood out like ropes at the word—his face turned white. His knuckles were knobs of ice on his pistol and his eyes pinpoints of fire.

"It is amusing to the gringos." His voice came deadly cold and calm, almost a whisper. "I know—I hear my radio! They say I am crazy, loco, a madman. But when I drop bombs of deadly gas on the towns and cities, El Paso, San Antonio, Houston—destroy bridges and waterworks, rob trains and mail ships, tie up and paralyze transport, and institute a reign of terror such as has never visited your country before—a reign of fire, sack, death!—then it will not be amusing, Señor Tolliver."

HE looked at Tex a long minute, his mouth a bloodless gash, nostrils quivering, eyes a red blaze, then relaxed like a punctured balloon, shrugged and smiled, shoved the pistol back into its holster.

"And I shall use your hacienda as a summer residence and hunting lodge," he finished, lightly dabbing at his face with a handkerchief. "Back to your seat, my friend."

Tex took his chair with a stifled oath of disappointment. He had tried to make an opportunity there

in front of the map, of grabbing Allende's pistol, but with an alert negligence the Mexican had warned him to keep his distance as he pointed out his fictitious frontier.

And a shadow, a slight scraping noise at the doorway told Tex's alert ears that one, maybe both, of the spies were lurking there, watching. There had been no chance of a break—not the slightest; the man's senses were like a cat's.

"You believe all that?" Tex asked curiously, concealing his chagrin.

"Implicitly," nodded the Mexican. "As surely as I sit here. It is my life's work. The restoration to my *patria* of its raped daughter, Texas, the Alsace-Lorraine of Mexico!"

A *marijuana*, thought Tex grimly, and a fanatic. More than a little mad, and wholly vicious. Bad, bad medicine.

"Very well," replied Tex thoughtfully. At a signal from the Mexican the two bodyguards popped out of sight like jacks-in-boxes. "And don't discount my humble self too lightly," finished Allende silkily. "I know, well enough, how to use this pistol. And I do not have to raise it from my hip to aim, *Halcon*."

Chuckling, he rolled his fourth husk cigarette, snapped a match on his thumb nail and watched the wisps of acrid-scented smoke curl ceilingward.

Trapped and helpless there in the cave, Tex felt for the first time in his life that he was just about licked. This devil wasn't overlooking a single bet. And there wasn't a Chink's chance of Keno, Dragoo or anybody north of the river springing him out of it, either—nobody knew where he was.

The Bat's daring visit to the Slash had been cunningly timed to a T; no one had seen them leave, Tex was positive. And the first suspicious move he made there, in the rock

chamber, would mean a load of shot into his belly, or a paralyzing knife deep into some part of his anatomy.

They wouldn't kill him outright—that was the hell of it. Wing or cripple or gut-shoot him, then give him the works in a manner he didn't like to think about. He knew his Mexicans.

TEX'S thoughts were shuttling through his brain like loom needles as he listened to the *marijuana's* suave voice drone on, uttering sentences that never would have passed his lips had he not known that Tex was just the same as a dead man. Brief accounts of his flying days and accident in California—his daring theft of the Navy Boeing. Of his robbing the S. P. express car and wholesale slaughter of messengers and trainmen.

No, he had no accomplice. It was simply a lucky night for him. The bombings and machine gunnings and dropping of Black Bat arrows; shooting down the mail plane and its escort outside Marfa.

The raids on Fort Ringgold and the Border Patrol fields and dromes. Of his successful landing on Slash territory, his stealthy entrance into the house, his surprising Tex asleep in bed, all fell glibly from his lips, one after another.

Basking himself, like a snake in the sun, in the recounting of his exploits. Telling them like an Indian chanting over the scalps of his victims. His manner mockingly frank, with a hint of boastfulness for his prowess and a hint of sneer for his enemies. The marijuana was taking effect, contracting the pupils of his eyes to red dagger points and staining his cheek-bones with dusky maroon.

"And now that we have gone over the situation," he said with a sudden brusque change of manner, "sup-

pose we get down to the case cars, Señor Slash. You have made things rather uncomfortable for me—with your set loops and baited traps. *Ciudad Mexico* is aroused; has sent planes from *Valbuena* and troops from interior garrisons.

"The border will be watched closely from this side, now. They appear to believe that the same person that has been dealing blows to Texas is responsible for the destruction of life and property south of the Rio. I have friends in the *Ciudad* who are powerful, and care not for anything I do to the gringo—they laugh and snap their fingers! But now, ah, señor!—they are worried, puzzled!"

DE ALLENDE got to his feet like a coyote's spring.

"So," he shrugged, spreading his palms upward, "you will be made a very great example for the edification of future meddlers. I neglected everything to attend to your case. Much, very much, I do not like you, *Señor muy malo hombre del Norte!* Therefore, you will eat sand for breakfast."

Tex looked at him. Looked with that bland, inscrutable stare he had.

"And just how do you propose to rub me out, *Señor Garrote?*"

His words were level, and the fingers that rolled the cigarette did not spill a tobacco flake. He had not gotten up from his chair.

"Ha!" De Allende struck his sinewy hands together, laughed. "You are curious as to the mode of your demise, eh? I'll tell you. You will ride back to your rancho in my black plane, handcuffed and trussed. I arrive above your hacienda—high, high in the air, señor. My black bird does the loop, and for a moment the earth is above my head. My safety belt holds me securely in the cockpit—for you there will be

no belt, my friend. You will be delivered to your friends all right—they'll be more than welcome to what they find on the ground. Is not that a neat disposition of the red killer of the north?"

A curious little tickle of ice played a devil's tattoo along Tex Tolliver's spine; his whipcord body grew taut as a fiddle-string. This arch-devil intended carrying out those calm and indifferent words to the last letter; it was not a pretty way to die.

Tex looked at him steadily, levelly, his eyes dangerous and deadly, his mind cool, figuring to the last second the last chance. He was staring old man death in the eye now, sitting in on a game with every card stacked against him. Mighty, mighty thin ice!

THE Mexican lit his fifth *marijuana*, his black eyes like sword blades, his lithe body straight as an arrow. Tex blew a mouthful of smoke toward him, and a sneering smile curled his lips. His tawny hair prickled like electric threads, his eyes were thin flakes of green ice, contemptuous, deadly. He leaned back in his chair, laughed.

And that laugh was far from pleasant.

"So that's it, eh?" His voice cut like a cat-o'-nine. "The famed and feared Black Bat—a coward! A damned yellow, white-livered peelow! A streak of yellow down your back a yard wide? Brave a-plenty with your bodyguards all around, and holding the drop on a prisoner. Fine! But man to man, eye and eye, you rate a whole gob of hogwash. *Hell!*"

"STOP!"

Faustino de Allende's sardonic face had gone livid as he screamed the word, the maniacal, jungle killer look distorting every feature. His

viper eyes blazed like red-hot coins, the twin veins on his forehead cording until they seemed likely to burst. He raised both clenched fists above his head, brought them down upon the table with a force that toppled the radio from it to the stone floor.

Tex, watching him with icy grimness, let his sneer grow more pronounced.

From the corners of his eyes he saw Bigote and Chongito advancing, gun and knives at the ready, and both moving like sliding cats. Well—they'd have to sand him out in that cavern; that crazy dope-head wasn't going to loop him alive out of any plane!

He set his muscles for the end.

"A coward, am I?" raged the Mexican, twinstreams of foam flecking the edges of his mouth. "*Por la Sangre de Cristo*, you will eat those words, gringo *cabrone!* Who are you to say that to me—me!—say words that no fool ever uttered before, and lived?"

TEX felt the point of Chongito's blade pressing in his back; saw Bigote's finger quivering on the trigger of his shotgun. He didn't move a muscle save raise his arm slowly and take a long pull at his cigarette.

"You know who I am to say this to you, de Allende," he replied coldly. "I am *El Halcon Rojo*, and you are a black bat. And you know my words are true. You are afraid to fight me, man for man, on even terms in the air. You are afraid, killer of other men, to die a man's death with your hands on the guntrips.

"You prefer to do away with your enemies when they are tied and helpless to defend themselves. The Black Bat resorts to a coward's way of settling a vendetta, because, de

Allende, you know that the Red Hawk can knock you from the sky."

The Mexican's savage face came within three inches of Tex's and his breath came in short, panting gasps. "Say you so!" he gasped hoarsely, gnawing at his bloodstained lips. "A coward, am I? You will see, you gringo fool! You think yourself God in Heaven in a plane, eh? The one and mighty Señor of the Sky, absolute and invincible! Bah!"

Allende threw back his head and laughed crazily, beating his head with clenched fists. "*Por la cabeza de San Juan!*" he gurgled. "The red gringo thinks that!"

FOR a long minute he pressed his opened palms over his eyes, his face writhing and working. Tex teetering on that infinitesimal thin line between life and death, heard a stifled curse from Chongito and winced as the greaser's knife dug a half-inch into his back and gave a torturing twist.

He felt the warm blood running down from the gouge, but bit off the oath of pain behind his teeth. There was but one way to pierce that marijuana-crazed armor, and that was to slur his bravery and outrage his vanity.

Many things Faustino de Allende was, but Tex knew that cowardice was not among them. He had played a desperate card—his last and hole card.

The Garrote took his hands from his face, and his features were strangely calm. His hooded eyes flicked about like a copperhead's, the insane glare gone and a chilling film veiling their pin points.

Slowly he wiped his froth-whitened lips, swabbed the sweat from his face, drew a deep, unsteady breath. Made a wet ball of his handkerchief and tossed it to the floor.

"Bigote—Chongo—away!" he com-

manded quietly, hoarsely. "Back to your places. I have decided upon a different manner in which to kill this gringo. I will break him first, before all of his friends, then send his smashed carcass to earth with my compliments."

His eyes like flakes of jet in the sun, de Allende spun on his heel, went to the locker and came back with a half-filled bottle of tequila and two glasses. His fingers almost steady now, he poured the drinks, left them on the table, and deftly rolled his sixth cigarette.

"Señor Tolliver," he said, "I am going to do something which may seem to you a strange thing. You have thrown an insult into my face that no man can utter and live. You have questioned my courage, accused me of cowardice. You know your words are a lie, and a black one. And you—I hate you as only an Allende can hate a mortal foe. Yet I know that you are not a coward, and dislike to die without a chance. You will get your chance, my friend, this very day."

HE inhaled, exhaled slowly, smoke trickling from his aquiline, sensitive nostrils.

"You are going back to Texas with me, in my *Bat*. I will follow my previous plan in flying over your rancho, high; and dumping you off of the fuselage. But this time there will be a chute on your back and your hands freed. You should land safely. In exactly half an hour I will be back above your earth acres, between your casa and the Rio. You will run out your *Red Hawk*, take the air and meet me at 10,000 feet.

"There we will fight. Before your friends, over your own soil, I will smash you—send you and your crimson bird to the ground in flames. You will be but exchanging one kind of certain death for another."

Tex could hardly credit the words. By a master effort he kept the surprise and exultation from showing in his face; steadied his voice to an impersonal quietness.

"I apologize for my words a while ago, de Allende," he said. "You are a devil, and deserve to die, but you are no *cobarde*. And you are giving me a sporting chance for my life. There are many things I can excuse you for—for that. And, I'll try to entertain you in the air with my *Halcon*."

The Mexican shrugged.

"There are a few details to be arranged, señor," he said coolly. "This is to be a duel, not one ship against a pack in a dog-fight. Many planes are on the Rio looking for me. You give your word that the combat will be between you and I, alone and unhindered?"

"I give you my word," nodded Tex quietly. "I, too, am for fair play."

"*Bueno*. And when I shoot you down, your countrymen will not interfere with my departure, or pursue and attack?"

"That, also, I promise. When you wash me out you will not be molested. No American ships will bother you, win, lose or draw. For Mexican planes I cannot answer, of course."

DE ALLENDE snapped his fingers impatiently.

"The duel will be north of the Rio," he stated. "They will not cross into *Tejas*. Afterward I can escape them easily."

He stood deep in thought a moment, fingers drumming on the table.

"One other thing, señor," he said. "You will write a true statement of the Zaragoza and National Railway raids, and a clause in regard to this *duello*. Set down the entire arrange-

ment on paper, then sign it. Myself, Chong and Bigote will witness it. I wish that document to clear myself with the officials in *Ciudad Majico*. After your demise I will see that it reaches the proper authorities."

Tex acquiesced, and for fifteen minutes wrote rapidly at the desk. The Mexican read the paper, then it was properly executed, the two mestizos signing by marks.

De Allende put it in an envelope and placed it in his shirt pocket. He handed Tex one glass of cactus liquor, raised the other.

"This day our words and promises are bonds, señor, sacred and inviolable," he said in a grave, low voice. "We accept each other as men and gentlemen. There will be no treachery. No cut 'chute shrouds, no other Yanqui planes, no double cross, in our affair. All will be, as you of the North say, 'according to Hoyle.' Shall we drink on that?"

Glass touched glass, returned to the table empty. Green eyes looked into blue-black pin points, two steel fingered, sinewy hands gripped in a shake of men. For a moment they stood so, the two swarthy peons looking on in puzzled perplexity. Then Faustino de Allende smiled quickly, shrugged, glanced at his wrist watch.

"Three o'clock," he remarked impersonally. "We had best be getting away. Dusk will come early tonight, on account of the clouds."

THE Black Boeing was trundled from its rock hangar and de Allende, donning a suit of overalls, swiftly went over it while Bigote filled the tanks to the caps. Tex didn't offer to assist, naturally, and sat off a little way, smoking and watching. He had certainly gotten a break, that day.

And as his eyes ran over the trim, sleek lines of the speed ship, its compact wings and pit, its two synchro-

nized prop guns, he knew that his flashy Halcon wasn't going to have any set-up in knocking over this streak of lightning.

The Mexican was a skilled and daring pilot, possessed of an uncanny air sense, as his survival of the storm proved. And he had smoked enough *marijuana* that day to put every faculty on wire edge and make him a damned formidable antagonist.

Tex's eyes shifted away to the white flat beyond the cliff. Little plumes of dust writhed upward from its leperous spread; it looked green and stagnant under the murky sun. The sultry air was suffocating, it burned the lungs like brass dust. The red sandstone bluffs radiated heat, the precipices of quartz threw back the humidity, and the alkali on the flat hurled them up again.

NOW and then a few drops of rain fell, kicking the powdery dust; dim thunder muttered and growled on the northwestern horizon. The far desert looked dead, still, lifeless under the low, sullen clouds. Another bad storm was brewing.

De Allende glanced once or twice at the sky as he finished his inspection of the Boeing, sable as a rock from prop to skid and without a single marking or insignia. He climbed in the pit, made contact and grated in the starter. The prop whirled with a sputter, there was a snapping backfire or two, then the powerful motor broke into a steady, bellowing roar.

Tex, helmet dangling in his hands, stood up, waiting.

The Mexican was in no hurry. He revived the engine carefully, warming it easily and expertly. He examined the twin machine guns; saw that the ammo belts were correctly placed, patted the black chambers with a grin. His chute was on the seat, ready; Bigote held his leather

coat and helmet, his goggles and gloves, standing by the fuselage.

De Allende dropped to the ground and slipped into his flying togs, belting the pistol around his waist outside the coat. He walked rapidly over to Tex, swinging helmet and goggles in his hand.

"Everything is understood?" he asked. "No questions?"

"No questions. I'm ready."

"*Bueno*. Climb in the opening behind the cockpit. You will find a chute there. I am not going to handcuff or tie you up. Señor Tolliver, for I know you will not attack me from behind or attempt treachery. One last smoke, then we go."

And Faustino de Allende twisted his seventh cigarette.

There was a small baggage compartment in the fuselage behind the pilot's seat of the Boeing, its opening a sliding steel trap. Tex adjusted the harness of the Russel silk chute—a 25-pound, 28-foot spread one—hunkered down in his cramped quarters, his head even with the back of the cockpit coaming.

HE had never taken a parachute jump, but knew well enough how to work the rip cord and shroud lines. This was where he got initiated into the Caterpillar Club proper, he reflected with a tight grin.

He finished his quirly; tossed the butt overside. His blood was thumping with the prospect of combat—he was the tawny-haired hawk of the blue once more, tensed for the joy of a sky joust with a worthy foe. Once in his own ship, he would ask nothing of any human.

The Mexican finished his hemp shuck cube and vaulted lightly into his seat. Looked back at Tex with a flashing grin, then spoke to Chongito, who stood by the ticking motor.

"I want that steak well done to-

night," he said. "With lots of *chili salsa*, and *aroz con queso*. *Adiós*."

He waved a gloved hand at the grinning *mozos*, who grimaced at Tex as Allende let off the brakes.

Adiós, gringo," shouted Bigote. "You will eat dirt tonight!"

The Boeing flashed out of the overhang and onto the alkali before Tex could reply to the taunt, its motor thundering. Like a speeding swallow it skipped over the flat, and de Allende took her off in a steep zoom that would have stalled any lesser powered plant.

He did not fool around and gain altitude in lazy corkscrews—he stuck her nose skyward and climbed like a scared monkey.

Tex, his wise and expert senses attuned to planes and the piloting of them, knew instantly that this stolen Navy ship was maybe faster than his *Halcon*. And a little fire lighted and burned steadily, deep in his narrowed green eyes.

He looked overside. The alkali flat between the cliffs was a gash cleft by some giant hand in the breast of the desert, the rocky ledge absolutely invisible from the air. While all around that rib of rocky *sierra* the desert stretched to the horizons, wild, tenantless, dry. For miles in every direction there was no water, and the drab expanse was sprinkled with arroyos, sand dunes, little white dry lakes, grisly alkali flats.

NO wonder the *Garrote* had not put him in a cave under guard; thirst would have gotten him in a few hours, after that kayo drop in his *agaudiente*.

At eight thousand feet Allende leveled off and revved up the motor until its beat purred a mighty throb. The air was cool as it skirled through struts and wires, lashed back in a whipping stream; the low

clouds were just above, ominous with a threat of rain, their shadow obscuring and darkening the desert terrain beneath.

Every now and then little gusts of mist swept against the fuselage. Again Tex glanced down. The drab expanse far below was unreeling like cinema celluloid behind the tail fin, and they were traveling better than two hundred miles an hour.

Once more he examined his chute closely, then squatted low in the lee of the cockpit, eyes on the gathering clouds ahead. It looked like more rain, up in Texas.

No one on earth, or in the sky, noticed the black monoplane as it flew above the first strata of clouds, high up, across the Rio Grande. With the exhaust silencer snicked on, cruising at 12,000 feet, the Bat hurled across the river silent as a winging falcon, the earth a dim purple blur far below.

Allende's compass course hadn't varied half a mile—he struck the Rio at the Point of a little hairpin curve between Via Acuna and the Pecos just below the painted mesas, and Tex knew that ten more minutes would put him over Slash acreage.

THE clouds were getting darker, more lowering; the thunder louder as the buildings of the rancho came in sight. Sharp flashes of lightning struck across the sky, and the rain squalls came more frequent and peppery.

In queer silence the ship scooted along, its only noise the whine of the wind and whirr of the prop. De Allende cut the gun to half throttle, studied the lay of ground a moment, then put the nose down in a slow, slanting glide.

Not a ship had they seen, either on the Mexico or Texas sides; nobody had heard the noiseless pass-

ing of the black plane hidden in the cloud layers.

Tex, half crouched in the cubby, saw numerous figures on the ground around his ranch house. The plane was barely above the last layer of cloud scud when Faustino de Allende looked around at him and nodded, jerking a gauntleted thumb over the cowl. And the dark face below the goggles flashed a sardonic, one sided grin.

"Do your stuff, Señor Red Hawk!" he called. "Up here, in one half hour, we meet again."

"Right" nodded Tex, his lips tight. Briskly they shook hands. "*Moritori de salutamus*, Garrote," added Tolliver, with a faint grin, easing his legs and torso over the coaming and hanging on with his left hand.

THE fingers of his right were fastened in the ring of the rip cord. A swift glance below showed him that they were almost directly above the hacienda.

The Boeing quivered, fell off on a wing, swinging Tex's feet and body clear of the fuselage. He turned loose, and the next second was hurtling head over heels earthward at a dizzy speed. The black plane shot up in a noiseless zoom, and disappeared in the clouds.

Tex, his head a whirligig, found it difficult to breathe. But a sudden glimpse of the earth, alarmingly close and slamming up to meet him, snapped him to, and his fingers jerked the ripcord.

A second later he was just about dismembered as the big white umbrella bellied out into the air. He felt like the harness had sunk half way into his body, and the jerk started the knife gouge in his back to bleeding afresh.

His hands on the shroud lines, he tugged this way and that, swinging

his body like a pendulum toward open ground around the corrals. He saw excited midget people running toward him, afoot and horseback, waving, gesturing, pointing.

And he grinned a little despite his pain, for he could imagine what a furor that white mushroom dropping from a silent sky would cause. Mighty near down now, with the closest spectators a hundred yards off.

Contact.

He cleared the last mesquite fringe and landed on the spongy ground just south of the barns, pulling himself up by the shroudlines to ease the shock. He hit rather heavily on hands and knees, but wasn't dragged as there was little air, and in a jiffy had the harness unbuckled and staggered to his feet, breathing heavily.

But he was still dizzy, and sank down on one knee, resting his head on a hand.

It was so the first arrivals found him. Link Spillane neck and neck with Keno Curry; the panting Sheriff Dragoo, Markley and a Federal man close seconds. Strong hands raised Tex to his feet, wrung his fingers, slapped his shoulders. Questions rattled at him like a chaut-chaut barrage, punctuated with wild whoops and the mad cavorting of the growing crowd.

THE King-pin of the Slash had returned from the dead—couldn't any shuck son of a tamale eater put the kibosh on him! *EEeee-Yow!*

Keno, saturnine face and blood-shot eyes gaunt, his nicotined teeth gleaming, said little, but his wolf gaze bored into Tex's features. Very well he knew that something hot was up, even before Tex got his breath and began snapping orders.

Once or twice his eyes searched the murky heavens questioningly, then returned to the boss.

"Link!" barked Tolliver. "Get the Hawk out on the line and tune her up quick as God'll let you. Juan—see to the tanks. Keno, plenty of ammo for the prop gun, see that she's working, and pronto. You, Washee, get hot water, bandages and dope for a knife cut in my back, toot-sweet. My leather coat and goggles, Chuck. Get action, everybody, step on it! I got no time to answer questions. The Bat's up there in the clouds, and in fifteen minutes I'm tangling with him in a solo scrap. *Just me and him, savvy! Everybody savvy?*"

BEFORE anyone could say anything he was off on a run toward the cassa, peeling off his coat and blood-stained shirt as he went. The orders of Tex Tolliver weren't questioned on the Slash-T, they were obeyed.

The rakish red Corsair was warming up on the line as Tex vaulted into the front cockpit, helmeted and goggled. Its twelve-cylinder hexagon motor was purring silkily, eager to get away.

"She's right, sir," Link had reported.

And as Tex waved his hand to the milling, shouting bystanders and threw off the restraining brakes, the fleet cloudster sprang forward like an unleashed whippet, arrowing down the T in a breath-taking taxi.

With a mighty zoom she was off carving a screaming chandelle straight up toward that low ceiling of clouds. And at the controls sat a veteran combat pilot, skywise and war-burned, a typical exponent of the survival of the fittest.

His eyes swept the heavens as he bored upward, full gun; his thumbs loosed a short burst from the Browning. Somewhere on the fringe of those drippy clouds the Bat waited, his engine silenced, idling

ready to pounce down upon the climbing red ship.

Tex's eyes were green lights behind his goggle glasses, his lips taut over his teeth in a killer's grin as he swung the Hawk on an ear and keeled level. The buildings of the Slash spread just beneath, 5,000 feet earthward.

And then a tiny black ship hurtled out of the cloud fringe and tore for him like a dart, orange-red flames licking from its nose. It came down in a rocketing, wing-tearing dive, and the Hawk's right wing went over as the sleet of bullets streaked by harmlessly.

It passed beneath, looped, in a lightning maneuver, entirely over, but missed the tail again with its burst because Tex had banked too sharply for its speed. The very fury of de Allende's charge had operated against him.

He came back head on, the motor thundering in an increased roar. The Bat was not using his silencer now. The two ships hurtled toward each other like express trains, throttles and machine guns wide open. Just short of a crash the Bat tumbled away on a left wing, and Tex shot the Corsair upward, gaining two hundred feet in altitude at one zoom.

THEY split like the letter Y, and Tex looked around to see Allende almost on the same level with himself, whirling around in a bank to renew the attack. Tex smiled mirthlessly. No tyro there—that Sprig was some pilot. He flew like a combat ace, and was taking the offensive without parley.

Tex started a loop, and suddenly ended it in a zoom. At the peak of the Immelmann, with de Allende trying to cut across the circle and break the distance to get in range, the Corsair flopped sidewise and

went swooping back over the route it had come.

The Boeing, gunned full, came tearing after him on even keel. No wild shooting there. Round and round they went, like a pair of foxes snaking their trails, the hands of each man at his machine-gun trips, waiting for the second when the kill would be in the ring-sights.

Tex could see the swarthy, snarling face in the Bat's cockpit, the features below the goggles and black silk mask demoniac. And the Hawk's fixed, killer grin flashed back at his antagonist. Round and round again, waiting—tensed forward in the pits, hot palms against the warm gun trips—ready!

Then Tex Tolliver took the offensive with a speed and skill that must have brought sudden sweat to the brow of the Mexican. He wasn't baiting, playing tag, any more. Like a flash, with teeth set, he started flying and fighting. And the lips that drew back from that thin white line of molars were like a cougar's.

A LLENDE swung sidewise madly, flinging a quick, snarling look over his shoulder, and saw that fixed, deadly grin. His curve became a bank, motor roaring wild.

Tex, on his tail like a shot, viciously tripped home the trigger, as, for the briefest second, the back of the Boeing's pilot seat showed against the ring-sight. Straight and true sped the bullets, sinking like leaden hail into the fuselage. The nose of the Bat shot upward in a swift zoom.

Tex had anticipated that stunt.

Not for nothing had he fought above the Champagne, Argonne, Ardennes. Not for nothing had he tangled with Prussia's best yadgstaffels and outwitted their cleverness.

The Boeing was across the sights

again—once more the Browning was beating its tattoo of leaden death. From the hot black mouth of the *mitrailleuse* the redstream licked forth. Tex could see the splinters fly from the camelback, pieces of fuselage whip backward as bullets ripped and tore through them. De Allende charged madly upward into the fringe of clouds, and Tex Tolliver of the Slash laughed.

"Come on, Shuck!" Tex pulled abruptly out of the zoom, flattened out, waiting.

He knew his tactics. The Boeing might be a bit faster than the Corsair, and its pilot a crackerjack stunt jock, but he was not battle burned. He was a marijuana-crazed maniac, mind aflame with the lust to kill, but clever and dangerous withal. Tex glanced downward. Knots and groups of pigmies on the ground were staring upward at the combat, stewing around like a swarm of ants.

His eyes swept the sky. Not another ship in sight save the two duelists. The Mex needn't be afraid of interference. Instinct made him fling a lynx-keen look over his shoulder—and that caution saved his life.

THE Mexican, with silencer on, had maneuvered above and behind him, and was now splitting down out of the clouds in another wire-screaming hurtle, gun trips jammed against the firing post. Tex, hunched low in the pit, took a long burst from Allende's guns in order to avoid its plunge.

Bullets drummed off the armored camelback and fuselage plates, a gauge shattered on the dash, a wire snapped and whipped back with a ping. A searing flame of pain, white hot, lanced his left arm, curiously numbing his fingers. Nicked, by God! First blood for the greaser.

Tex tilted out of it at forty-five

degrees, and saw a stream of yellow tracers slide dangerously past his cheek. That hombre was good, no kidding. Almost he had caught Tex flat-footed with that sneak-up by using his silencer.

But now the Boeing was roaring wide open again, following close on level keel, its Brownings ripping viciously.

The stick of the Corsair went back, tail came down and nose went up and over. Then down and down, like a red phantom of singing death, the *Hawk* swept for its prey. Down, straight down, motor roaring and crimson tail licking from the exhausts behind it, wires singing and struts skirling.

His charge swept him by the Boeing like a streak, the machine-gun playing a wicked tattoo. Wildly the Mexican banked from its pat, went into a flashlike Immelmann, with bullets streaking and streaming past him as he fought upward like a harried rabbit. That unexpected plunge and death-dealing sideways twist had crossed-up Allende—he looked back over his shoulder.

Tex could see that savage face, smeared now with oil, its lips drawn back in jungle-killer rage. And Tex laughed as he kicked over stick and rudder-bar and swung for him.

THEN, without warning, something happened. The *Bat* was on its back like a streak of lightning, turned wrongside out, and its twin guns spat a stream of lead down into the *Hawk's* instant wingover. Bullets pelted into the pit and engine and tail assembly—the red plane quivered like a stricken bird. Cursing, Tex shoved on full throttle, felt his motor lag.

One of those bullets had struck some part of his power plant and slowed it up. Probably dented a gas line. Damn that *peelow!* Why,

the son was good!—good! A foe-man worthy of any sky-jock's steel. He had already winged him and crippled his plane by a series of bewildering maneuvers.

Steeling himself against the searing pain that was fast deadening his arm, Tex went a half loop and rolled a completed Immelmann that shot him up behind de Allende.

Still diving, he saw the Boeing level off below and a bit in front. Then, jazzing top gun, he tilted the prop of the *Red Hawk*, crouching behind the Browning, his right hand hot on the trip.

The spectators 4,000 feet below, gazing upward at the duel in the darkening rain-spattered sky, swore, jumped about, or watched silently, according to their several natures.

What they saw next, not a mother's son of them would ever forget.

DE ALLENDE had swung sideways madly, straining every strut to get away from that savage dive. Tex followed, his *mitrailleuse* raving. And the *Hawk* scenting a kill, dove forward recklessly.

Suddenly it was on the *Bat's* tail, frozen there, its prop almost cutting slivers off the flipper fin.

Tex had his trips pressed down, his ugly-mouthed gun spitting an unbroken *rafale* of death. Desperately the Mexican tried to evade him, shake him off his tail. Running, turning, twisting, diving like a snipe gone loco, with the Corsair riding his rump like a hawk after a raven. The crimson plane clung there like a leech, matching stunt for stunt, move for move.

Teeth bared, de Allende recklessly looked over his shoulder as that ship charged close, insanely close, to his tail. Bullets ripped through the Boeing, sewing patterns in its fuselage, making a sieve of the

motor hood, rapping the prop to pieces.

ONCE again the Mexican cast a white faced, furious look behind him, body hunched low behind the cowlings. Once again Tex Tolliver laughed.

Allende sat up sharply, as though he had been hit. Bullets were smashing into the cockpit now like steel wasps. Tex could see the splinters fly as the wheel stick flew from the Mexican's hand.

The *Bat* flopped sidewise—its pilot grabbed for the shattered control. Down and over a trifle, hanging on its left wing as it pirouetted in the air, the Boeing skidded, unable to escape that deadly stream from the Brownie—a stream that never left it and ripped from prop to skid.

The moment of reckoning had come, and Faustino de Allende knew it.

He was fighting for his life, his ship shot to ribbons, his engine coughing, choking, ready to quit. Blood dribbled onto his goggles from a furrow on his head; a red-hot iron pressed against his side; the fingers of his right hand were mangled.

Another burst—the *Black Bat* wobbled, swung sidewise. Then without warning the Mexican tailed it with a savage jerk of his left hand. The undercarriage of the dangerously close *Hawk* barely cleared the Boeing's tail—it did not clear the zooming front section.

There was a sinister, splintering crash, then the crippled, stricken ships fell apart.

The right wing of the Navy scout had been cut clear loose by the smash of the *Hawk's* engine cowlings. Both started down, out of control.

Tex, fighting desperately to save his red ship from a workout, saw the

Mexican leap, apparently unhurt, from his shattered plane; saw the white mushroom of his chute plop open. Deliberately the *Bat* had crashed into him, courting death to send Tex down. Tricky to the last, that *marijuana*.

Tex went curving earthward in long circles, his stick dead, his prop smashed and engine buckled. Every nerve and instinct was centered on landing with a minimum of damage. Tight work this.

He flung a glance at the Boeing, twisting and wobbling groundward, flames licking back along its fuselage. It struck in the greasewood nose-on, its black tail thrust toward the sky, gleaming sinister in the flames which surrounded it. Its rudder and elevators made it look like a red tinted cross—a grisly monument in the mesquite to the memory of the phantom *Bat*.

A hundred and fifty yards behind it Faustino de Allende was coming down in the scrub.

TEX, in sickening lurches, hit the earth on the edge of the chaparral. He splintered through the lacy branches, flopped, miraculously, teetered a moment, then landed on a wing in a ripping, tearing crash.

The *Hawk* did not turn over. Nose buried in the earth it came to a rest, its red fins poked skyward. Tex's upflung arms protected his head and face from the sickening jar against the crash pad—automatically he had cut the switch and there was no fire. Cool to the end, he hurled himself out of the wreck, stumbled and gained his feet, clawing at his six-shooter with his good right hand.

Racing hoofbeats and running boots were barging across the open; shouts and hoarse yells sounded as

the excited spectators raced toward the scene of the crashes. But Tex was ahead of the foremost as he stumbled through the dusky mesquite, making for the spot where the Mexican had come down.

He had taken a pretty good observation of his landing place, and fifty feet away from it he could see in the misty, fast darkening evening, a black figure. The white billows of the chute seemed to be caught in a mesquite, with Allende suspended from it, trapped and struggling to free himself.

Tex grinned a little as he pounded on, gun in hand. Served him damned well right. But as Tex came up, something in that limply swaying body made his mouth tighten, his eyes narrow. One look, a quick test of the heart was enough.

Evidently de Allende's body had hit the top of the tree, and the momentary stoppage of his speed had caused the shroudlines to crumple up slackly, and three or four of them had wound themselves around his neck when his body had crashed on through the branches.

The bulging eyes, contorted face and trickle of blood threading from a corner of his mouth told the story. He had hung himself. His neck was broken.

THE main room of the hacienda was ablaze with light and filled with a talking, questioning, excited mob of Valverdites.

Tex, with a frosted "hushpuppy" in his fist and his arm in a sling, was recounting his adventure to a profanely impressed audience.

"Son," said the Border Sheriff, when Tex had finished, "you shore been places and done things since this day was mawnin'. I reckon the State o' Texas owes yuh a right smart vote of thanks."

THE END



-BARON-
JAMES HARDEN HICKEY

...BORN IN SAN FRANCISCO IN 1884—
HIS PARENTS WERE CATHOLICS WHO HAD
FLED FROM IRELAND TO ESCAPE PERSECUTION— HIS MOTHER TOOK HIM TO PARIS
TO BE EDUCATED AT A JESUIT SCHOOL AND LATER AT ST. CYR
MILITARY COLLEGE— ON FINISHING SCHOOL HE BECAME THE
MOST RENOWNED DUELLIST IN ALL FRANCE —
(IT IS SAID THAT HE FOUGHT 47 DUELS IN 3 YEARS.)

Famous Soldiers of Fortune

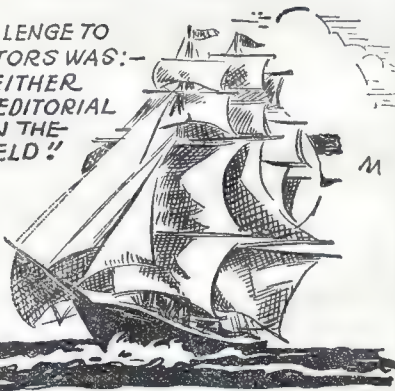
By
Stookiz
Allstars



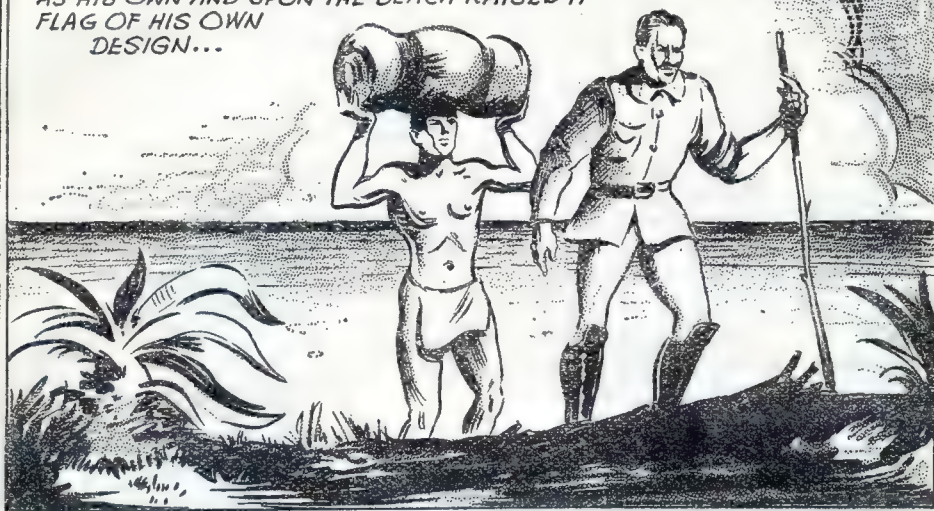
IN 1884, WHILE ONLY 24 HE STARTED A
PAPER CALLED "TRIBOULET" IN WHICH HE
DEFENDED THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE
ROYALIST PARTY WITH SUCH VIGOR THAT HE
WAS INVOLVED IN 42 LAW SUITS AND
FOUGHT COUNTLESS DUELS.

HIS CHALLENGE TO
RIVAL EDITORS WAS:—
"MEET ME EITHER
UPON THE EDITORIAL
PAGE OR ON THE
DUELING FIELD!"

IN 1886 THE CHURCH AWARDED HIM
THE TITLE OF BARON BECAUSE HE HAD
CHAMPIONED IT... HE WAS LEFT A SMALL
INCOME BY HIS FATHER IN 1888 AND
STARTED AROUND THE
WORLD ON A SAILING
BOAT.



...OFF THE COAST OF BRAZIL THE BOAT STOPPED AT THE UNINHABITED ISLAND OF TRINIDAD—HICKEY WENT ASHORE AND PROCLAIMED THE BEAUTIFUL ISLAND AS HIS OWN AND UPON THE BEACH RAISED A FLAG OF HIS OWN DESIGN...



(NOTE: THIS IS NOT THE LARGE ISLAND OF TRINIDAD IN THE CARIBBEAN SEA.)



TRINIDAD
HARBOR
1895

HE THEN COMPLETED HIS TRIP BUT RETURNED TO THE ISLAND TWO YEARS LATER WITH A BOATLOAD OF SETTLERS AND ESTABLISHED HIMSELF AS JAMES I, KING OF TRINIDAD—THEY BUILT UP A NICE HARBOR AND FOR SEVERAL YEARS

ALL WENT WELL WITH THE TINY KINGDOM.....

BUT—IN 1895 ENGLAND SEIZED THE ISLAND FOR A CABLE STATION.....

HICKEY PROTESTED TO ALL THE POWERS BUT COULD GET NO AID AND LOST HIS ISLAND—THE N.Y. TIMES MAINTAINED UNTIL THE LAST THAT THE ISLAND WAS LAWFULLY HICKEY'S.

....THE BARON NEXT WENT TO MEXICO AND FOUGHT IN A REVOLUTION—FOR HIS SERVICES HE WAS AWARDED TRACTS OF LAND—

HE TRIED TO SELL THIS LAND IN ORDER TO OUTFIT AN EXPEDITION TO HONOLULU—

...FAILING TO FIND BUYERS HE COMMITTED SUICIDE IN EL PASO—FEB—1898.



Broken Images



The Three White Carabaos Held the Key to Salvaged Wealth in this Exciting Story of the Philippine Islands

By **LIEUT. MORLEY BURROUGHS**

Author of "The White Man's Way," "Danger Trails," etc.

"Oh, we won't go back to Subig any more,
Oh, we won't go back to Subig any more,
Oh, we won't go back to Subig,
'Cause the 'skeeters there are too big,
Oh, we won't go back to Subig any more!"

ONE of the grimy pair sang the song in high affected falsetto, while the man with him beat time with a bottle long

since drained of its liquor. The proprietor of the *tindahan*, within the Walled City of Manila, gazed at the two in open disgust.

Then his eyes left them to stare widely at the unobtrusive little man who edged in at the door and moved easily toward the table where the maudlin men sang. The proprietor noticed that the newcomer kept his right hand buried deep in the side pocket of his grimy flannel coat that had once been white.

A livid scar ran down from the

hair above his right eye, across the bridge of his nose, to the left corner of his tight-locked lips.

His smile was twisted. He jerked his free hand at the bartender as he approached the pair at the battered table. The bartender dropped his bar towel and turned to the racks of bottles behind the counter.

The newcomer took a chair across the table from the singer and his accompanist smiled at them. They started back from him, for his smile was twisted, and looked more a snarl than a smile.

"And what, gentlemen," he said softly. "is wrong with Subig? I once knew the place, and I rather liked it."

They looked at each other, those two, and their right hands darted to their belts.

"I wouldn't, you know," said the small man, and his diction was plainly American, "for if you happened to be even a split second slow, I should drill you both between the eyes."

A GASPING sigh came from the two men. Eyes bored into those of the newcomer. Wintry eyes of the newcomer stared back. His right hand was still hidden in the pocket. They noticed that, hot though it was, the man's coat was buttoned up around his throat.

"Who are you? What the hell you buttin' in here for?" snarled the man who had been singing, and his voice was no longer falsetto.

"I? Oh, call me Scarface. I was wondering why you didn't like Subig. Used to be stationed there, in the Navy, sort of, and a bit sentimental about the place. Plan going back, some time, if I can find a couple of right guys to throw in with me."

"Well, I dunno," said the second man slowly, "we'd kind of like to go back to Subig ourselves, under

certain conditions. And we need another man, if . . ."

"If what?" said the little man softly.

For a long moment the two who had been seated at the table looked at each other, and their eyes wordlessly asked and answered questions. Finally the singer nodded.

"My name's Giles . . . er . . . Pierpont," he said at last. "And my pal's name's Jack Carter—Scarface. We ain't trustin' everybody, but you look like a guy that would do things for money, and has guts. We could use you, but if you double-cross us. . . ."

"Careful, gentlemen," said the little man, "I don't like that word! Not any! What's the lay? If I don't like it I'll keep out, and keep my mouth shut!"

Again that exchange of looks on the part of the two men.

The bottle came, with three glasses. The two drained theirs, while the newcomer sipped his easily. Chairs were drawn up closer, faces almost touched across the table.

Then the two men's hands went to their pockets again. Instantly the muzzles of two guns appeared over the edge of the table, pointing squarely at the singer and accompanist. But when Scarface saw what the two brought forth, and that they were not guns, he smiled his twisted smile and the guns disappeared.

Two white images rolled out upon the table top. Scarface looked at them questioningly, his eyes narrowing slightly. They were images done in some sort of white wood—of two carabao, the water buffalo of the Islands. But there was something strange about them.

One image had but one eye, while the other had no horns. The images oddly were incomplete. Scarface extended his hand for them, touched

them carelessly. The eye hadn't been cut out of the one, or the horns off the other.

THE two men grinned as Scarface looked over the images.

"There's a story to 'em," said Pierpont, huskily, his little eyes glittering redly below his bushy black brows, "and this is it: there's another figure, you know: of a perfect white carabao! They belonged to Captain Jim Kane, of the *Olongapo*, a little schooner with an auxiliary engine. He salvaged the gold from a ship sunk off Balangiga, in Samar, and there were a lot of people after it. When they found that Kane had raised it, they naturally were after *him*!

"It seems Kane was a character in the Islands. Knew a lot about the natives. Had even been adopted into a tribe of wandering Igorotes near Bataan. Spent some time with 'em, studying 'em, to write 'em up for the magazines. Great friends with 'em. When he left they gave him three white carabao, little things no bigger than watch-charms. One was perfect. These we have are the other two. Igorotes told Kane that they would be friends with whoever came with the three figures.

"So, when the others who wanted that treasure, were hot on Kane's trail, he put in at Subig Bay, intending to take refuge among the Igorotes. But . . . there were traitors aboard the *Olongapo*. It took fire in the hold in the middle of Subig Bay. Pursuers found nothing but wreckage when they came up with the schooner, and a few men floating on the water. The sharks dragged these under, as the pursuers watched. The dead men had been slashed to ribbons with knives. Kane was missing. So was the treasure. Only two of the white images were found."

A GENTLE exhaling of breath from Scarface.

"How'd you two get those two dinguses?"

"Got 'em off a couple of the floaters, before the sharks got 'em, if it's any of your business."

"And nothing was ever heard of Kane? Odd! What's your theory about the treasure?"

"Somebody got away with it. Maybe Kane got away, too, and got the stuff to the natives, or maybe they got it some other way. It might have got to them overland. No way of knowing. But Kane couldn't do much himself, with his head almost cut off. . . ."

"I thought," said Scarface grimly, "you didn't know what happened to him! No members of the crew were saved?"

"None! And don't be too damned inquisitive—Scarface!"

With his twisted grin very much in evidence, Scarface leaned back, his liquor still untouched, and unbuttoned the front of his coat. Frowning slightly, Pierpont and Carter watched him.

When the coat was completely unbuttoned, and the lapels flung back, gasps of dismay broke from the throats of Pierpont and Carter. Once more their hands went to their belts. Once more they found themselves covered before they could bring their hidden weapons into play.

"Who," began Pierpont, "who are you!"

"Just," replied Scarface, "one of the . . . er . . . 'pursuers,' you spoke about!"

A CROSS the chest of Scarface stretched a gold watch-chain. Pendant from the middle thereof was a little image—of a carabao, of white, exquisitely carved wood! It was a perfect figure, without blemish.

"I'm in on your show—Pierpont! Odd you almost forgot your name, that way, wasn't it? What say, Carter? And let me tell you something. There isn't a man in the Islands faster on the trigger than lil' ol' Scarface. So don't try any funny business! Keep your guns. You'll maybe need them. But remember this, too! I've got eyes in the back of my head, and nobody gets this white carabao off me, see?"

"Oh, we didn't mean anything, Scarface," whined Carter ingratiatingly. "We meant a perfect split, or we wouldn't have told you in the first place!"

"Yeah, I know! Either one of you would crawl through a sewer for a dime! I'm not easily fooled. Besides, for two years I've been looking all over Hades and back for those two gadgets you guys carry! Thought you'd eventually head for Manila, so's to be within striking distance of Bataan. I just waited. We'll be going out of here tonight!"

"Where to, Scarface?" wheedled Pierpont.

"Bataan! I'll be walking on the Luneta at nine tonight. Come there. When I see you, and you spot me, I'll start going. You follow me—and keep your hands in sight!"

Scarface rose from the table, and backed away, hand still in his pocket. He backed out of the door before Pierpont or Carter made a move. They stared after him, then wiped the clammy sweat from their faces.

"Strange gazabo," muttered Pierpont. "His eyes give you the willies. Carter, follow him! We've got to get that carabao dingbat!"

"Follow him yourself! Did you hear what he said about being fast on the trigger? I wonder if anybody knows we cold-copped Kane and tossed him to the sharks!"

UNTIL almost dawn the converted *banco*, with coughing balky auxiliary motor thumping rhythmically, lay off Grande Island, at the entrance to Subig Bay. Scarface was at the wheel, and his eyes were wintry, cold as agate or obsidian. His lips were twisted in that snarly smile of his.

It was the scar which twisted his smile, ordinarily; but now his snarl was not of the lips and face only, but a deep rooted thing, out of the man's heart. His hands on the wheel were white-knuckled with the strain he placed upon them.

His eyes looked away beyond Grande Island. To Olongapo on the right, thence followed the rough coast of the bay down to Maquinaya and Subig. The latter place, he knew, was one of the hell holes of the Islands, avoided by most, a haven of refuge for men on the run from the law—or from one another.

Green Jungle growths between Olongapo and Subig, leading back from the sea to the hills. Jungle which hid many strange and terrible things—snakes that could squeeze a man to half his girth, and twice his length in a matter of minutes. Monkeys occasionally, bloodsucking leeches.

The jungle would hide many secrets, as it had in the past. The jungle would erase everything, even evidence of dread double-cross.

Scarface had told Pierpont and Carter that he hated the word, and as he thought of it now the scar on his cheek flamed crimson. He touched it with his fingertips in what was something like a caress, a surgeon's touch on an open wound.

DOWN in the hold Pierpont and Carter were supposed to be sleeping. They had offered to take their tricks at the wheel, but he had refused, and had himself brought the

craft out of Manila Bay, past Corregidor, on to the entrance to blue bosomed Subig.

"Seems to know what he's about," whispered Pierpont. "Seems to know a hell of a lot about the Islands. If he does he must know the Igorotes, too, or he wouldn't take a chance hunting them. Like needles in a haystack, too, bumming all over the place. Now here's what we can do. . . ."

"But we'll have to have that gadget Scarface carries, fella. You know the rest of the story, that we didn't tell Scarface? If the guys with only one, or two of those things put in an appearance, the Igorotes will know that treachery has happened somewhere—and the bearers of the images will be shot full of arrows?"

"We'll keep that to ourselves! But those little dog-eaters will give us a hearing, when we bring in those *three* images. They'll have to. They'll discover we've got no right to 'em, but they'll have to let us come close to make sure—and then we've got a smear of guns against their bows and arrows! There's just a little bunch of 'em, and you and me can shoot! If anybody asks questions, we simply tell 'em the Igorotes jumped us. Besides, the Constabulary is always after 'em, and won't ask *too* many questions!"

"Yeah, but we've got to do something about Scarface!"

"The first bullet gets him, when he least expects it!"

At the wheel Scarface knew nothing of this, though he could have guessed quite accurately, for Scarface himself knew things he hadn't mentioned.

AS the sun appeared, he turned the prow of his *banco* into the harbor, and started down the bay. He sailed as one entirely sure

of himself, and the faster flew the *banco*, the grimmer became his face, the redder that scar on his cheeks and nose.

"Off there," he muttered to himself, "is Maquinaya! It should be five hundred yards out. . . ."

But as the craft approached Maquinaya, Scarface studied the coastline carefully.

"There's the native graveyard on the point, and the light. There's the trail over the ridge, and Half-Moon Bay. There's the Rifle Range Dock—and Maquinaya!"

He swung the prow of the *banco* sharply to port and stared over the side into the dark green waters of the bay. The bottom could plainly be seen now. Waving green tree-like growths. Vari-colored rocks, through which swept underwater currents to move to and fro the waving things which grew in the crevasses. Many-hued fishes were there, opalescent in the sun.

STILL Scarface stared over the side. He did not notice, so engrossed was he in his observations, that Pierpont and Carter had come up from the hold and were watching him. His eyes peered into the deep water.

Then he saw what he sought. It looked like an undersea kite on a string. A long, narrow, greenish thing, waving to and fro as the growths on the bottom waved, and like them, its roots also were fastened in the bottom.

Scarface nodded his head in satisfaction, then started as he heard the footfalls of Pierpont and Carter.

"Good morning, gentlemen!" he said softly. "You see, I haven't double-crossed you, as you expected! I've brought you to Subig, as I said I would."

"Yeah?" said Pierpont, grimacing, expectorating over the side. "Yeah?"

Well, one of us slept while the other kept awake. We ain't trustin' scarcely anybody, see?"

BUT Scarface did not seem to be listening. His eyes were gazing ahead, where a huge rocky promontory, stretching out into the bay, shut off possible view of the dirty little village of Subig.

Then suddenly his eyes came back to Pierpont and Carter, and his twisted lips shaped themselves in an airy whistle.

*"Oh, we won't go back to
Subig any more,
Oh, we won't go back to
Subig any more..."*

As Scarface whistled his eyes, red-rimmed with loss of sleep, bored into those of Pierpont and Carter. He whistled, but behind the twisted shape of his whistling they could see the snarl they remembered from his smile.

For a full minute they stared at him. He finished the silly ditty, then started again, and his eyes never once strayed from the two men.

It was Pierpont, with a crackling curse, who turned away from him, lowering his eyes. Try as he might, he could not out-stare this man of the scarred face.

Carter followed his partner to the prow of the *banco*, and with their backs turned they spoke in whispered asides to each other, while seeming to be studying the green jungle which stretched down to the sea.

"His damn whistling gets my goat!" snarled Carter. "*Who* won't go back to Subig any more? He looked at us as though he didn't think we would! As though maybe we wouldn't be able to, after..."

"Bullets will kill him, Carter! Don't lose your nerve!"

THE prow of the boat was headed toward that rocky promontory. Just as it would have struck, Scarface put his wheel hard over, and started to swing farther out from shore. Pierpont turned like a shot.

"Hey, you damned fool, stop it! Swing in here! The trail to Bataan starts at the base of that big rock, on this side!"

Scarface grinned widely, for the first time since he had been with these men. And as Pierpont stared at him he kept on grinning. Then he started his whistling again, as he turned back to starboard, kicking the boat in to the sandy, shelving beach.

Pierpont swore again, and with Carter at his side, walked swiftly up to Scarface.

"You knew where the trail to Bataan was, all the time!" he accused. "What you trying to pull on us?"

"Wanted to see if *you* knew, gentlemen!" stated Scarface, and began again his whistling. When they stepped ashore at last he was still whistling.

"You chaps go on ahead," he said softly, pointing at the dim trail that led inland, "I don't like strangers behind me! You can trust me not to shoot!"

Then he whistled again.

Fifteen minutes of brisk walking, back from the sea, and Scarface was still whistling, and there seemed a rollicking, vengeful devil in his music—of that same tune these two had been singing in the *cantina* within the Walled City in Manila's heart.

Pierpont whirled upon Scarface, his face fiery red, his eyes glittering, his right hand on his gun butt.

"Stop that damned whistling!" he yelled, "It gets my goat!"

"Yeah? Why? And keep your hand off your gun! How's the tune get your goat? Rather I'd talk, maybe?"

"Anything, only stop that eternal whistlin'!"

"Okay! What do you guys know about the Igorotes? Do you know they're mighty good with their arrows? Can hit a dime nine times out of ten, as far as they can see it—and they've got darned good eyes! I might tell you that they don't like to be double-crossed, any better than I do—or than Jim Kane liked it, if he lived long enough to know he had been!"

"He didn't," snarled Carter. "He didn't have a chance to. . . ."

PIERPONT whirled on Carter, and knocked him flat with a savage right hander to the jaw. Neither looked back at Scarface, whose face was redly suffused, whose eyes glittered, but whose twisted lips were wide again in a terrible smile.

An hour after leaving the sea, Scarface called to Pierpont and Carter. They whirled at his call, to find themselves looking into the muzzles of his guns.

"This isn't a double-cross," he said easily. "I never double-cross anyone! But there's something about those white carabao you chaps apparently don't know! All three are supposed to be presented by the same hand!"

"How did you know that?" screamed Pierpont.

"So you knew *that*, too, eh?" grinned Scarface. "Guess I covered you just in time, eh? Gonna whirl on me and get *my* carabao, after bumping me, weren't you? As soon as I'd led the way to the Igorotes! Well, don't do it! Those carabao have to be presented in a certain way, you know. It's something like a password. Did you know that? Toss 'em over, and keep your hands away from your guns!"

"How do you know about how the carabao must be presented, Scarface?"

"Toss 'em over, and maybe I'll tell you!"

RIGHT hands hovering just above their gun butts, left hands delving for the imperfect images, Pierpont and Carter complied with the command.

He knew, studying them through narrow eyes, that they were as dangerous as rattlesnakes. When he stooped to pick up the images they would take a chance and draw. They had no intention of sharing that treasure with him, hadn't had from the beginning.

"I might tell you, gentlemen," he said softly, as the images fell at his feet, "that for the last ten minutes we have been watched! Little brown men in the jungle on either side of the trail. If something happens they are in doubt about . . . well, they can hit a dime nine times out of ten as far as they can see it!"

Stiffening as though they had been shot, Pierpont and Carter whirled and stared at the green wall of the jungle. Scarface stooped quickly and caught up the images.

"I didn't say, you know," he said easily, "that I knew exactly how these little dinguses should be presented!"

"You tricked us, Scarface!" snarled Pierpont. "You'll pay for it, too—sometime!"

"Wouldn't wonder! I always pay my way. Get that? *I always pay my way!* Turn around and get going!"

Ten minutes later there came a peculiar hail from the jungle ahead. It was answered from right and left, and the callers seemed very close. Pierpont and Carter stopped dead in their tracks, stiffening with fear, as though already they felt the tips of barbed arrows in their backs.

From right behind them came another answer to the hail. They whirled, to stare at Scarface.

Then, swiftly, like so many cats, came the little men. Almost naked men, unsmiling agate-eyed. They were led by a man dressed in ragged clothing too large for him. The face of this one was pitted with smallpox scars, and he strode up to Scarface as though he had no fear at all of him, or of anything.

WITH a swift glance at Pierpont and Carter, Scarface sheathed his guns, and drew from his clothing the little white carabao. Three images, two imperfect ones, one perfect, exquisite of design. From the lips of the little men burst an excited cackling.

The leader dropped to his haunches, motioned Scarface down beside him.

With his right hand Scarface cleared a place in the trail, sweeping aside the dead leaves and mold. First he took the carabao which had no horns, and placed it in the cleared space, head pointing up the trail. Then he took the one with the single eye and placed it beside the first, with a handbreadth between the two.

The brown men pressed forward, hands gripping bows and arrows, to stare down at the ceremony. For a moment Scarface stared at the ragged leader, as he fingered the perfect image.

Then he lowered it into place.

He set it between the first two images, but with the horned head pointing down the trail!

The pitted face of the brown leader broke into a wide smile, and swiftly he began talking and gesticulating. Neither Pierpont or Carter understood a word that was said; but Scarface did, for he answered back swiftly, in the same dialect.

PIERPONT and Carter faced each other. Then they stared again at Scarface, who looked up at them grinning, his hands dangling over

his knees, his holsters swinging free.

He said nothing. He merely looked at them, and grinned his twisted grin. He even eased back on his heels, carelessly, as though what they did worried him not in the slightest.

Their mouths hung open.

"Kane!" barked Carter. "Kane! Only Kane would be so much at home with these dog-eaters! We thought we had. . . ."

"Yeah?" said Kane. "Yeah? You thought you'd killed me, didn't you? You got the other four men of my crew all right, and you almost got me. I opened my eyes and saw you, and moved aside, just enough—but you gave me this! Too bad I ditched the stuff before you fired the ship, wasn't it? Then you tossed me to the sharks! Well?"

The brown men were looking curiously from Scarface to Pierpont and Carter, and back again. They understood no word, but they knew expressions of anger, and of fear, when they saw them.

The crooked, talon-like hands of Pierpont and Carter hovered over their pistol butts. Trapped! Without a chance! But these men only had bows and arrows, against their revolvers, and Scarface was off balance, hands many inches from his guns.

There was only one way out, they thought—and without looking at each other, because each knew what was in the other's mind, they went for their guns. With their hands on the butts of their weapons, and the weapons half drawn, Scarface had still made no move to draw.

Out came the guns. Up came their muzzles.

Then, from the jungle, sounded the taut twanging of bow-strings.

Pencils of death came out of the green, a score together, snapping swiftly out, flashing between the standing men, missing all of them—save only Pierpont and Carter.

Screaming, their half raised weapons pumping bullets into the ground at their feet, the two men staggered back, slender arrows protruding from their chests and stomachs. A half score arrows had struck each of them. Then their knees buckled.

EVEN as they fell, they tried to maintain control of themselves; fought bitterly to keep from falling forward. Those arrows were all in front of them, and if they fell on them their own weight would make death doubly sure—and faster.

They managed to fall to their backs.

Scarface rose and strode forward to stand over them.

"Two years," he said softly into their contorted faces, "is a long time to hunt for double-crossers! I hate double-crossers! I even hate the word! Or did I tell you that! My brown friends also dislike being double-crossed, and they never take chances. You should have known that! You couldn't play square. If you had . . . well, I would have

given you one week's start, part of the treasure, and then set the law on you for killing my crew. But you didn't think anybody would refuse to double-cross you, did you?"

Carter opened his mouth, the lips flicked with red life blood, to make answer. But no answer came, and so he died.

And after a minute or two, Pierpont followed him.

As Scarface Kane turned away he thoughtfully touched the red weal on his cheeks with his fingertips.

"I'm going to the *banco*," he said to the ragged brown man, "and then go pull up the money at the end of that float! It was hard to find, my friend! Two years have turned it so green it looks just like the water itself. Would you and your friends—and my friends—like to have a little boat ride on Subig Bay?"

Delightedly they cackled, like little children, and headed into the trail. Scarface followed them still fingering the crimson slash, whistling. . . .

And the tune suggested something about never, never coming back to Subig.

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The Globe Trotter

Adventurers, we want to hear from you all! Your experiences, your opinions, your suggestions—let's have them. Get the habit of writing us every month.

After all, in the last analysis, the most important thing in the world is friendship. Nothing can equal the pleasure that we feel in swapping experiences, exchanging thoughts and sharing confidences with our friends.

We are all friends—the editor, the readers and writers of **THRILLING ADVENTURES**—and this is the corner where we meet each month. A knock is as welcome as a boost. Boast if you want to, as long as you are truthful. We're friends!

* * *

Our contest on "Why I Like **THRILLING ADVENTURES**" certainly drew a big response, letters from every corner of the country finding their way to our office. We'd like to show them all to you. But space limitations confine us to printing only the prize-winning communications.

The first prize was won by John S. Muranko, 3807 Pershing Avenue, Parma, O. His letter follows:

When a fellow has to be cooped up in a stuffy office and take all of the boss's bull and bulling without telling him where to get off at for fear of losing the job that spells bread and butter for his wife and two kids, and is still young and healthy and rarin' to go but can't let loose on account of the much needed B & B, it's not always pleasant. Well, around quitting time I'm pretty well fed up with it all. When I get home, things still aren't clicking just right.

But after supper is over and the two Indians are confined to their reservations for the night I come into my own. I make a dive for **THRILLING ADVENTURES** that I'd bought merely out of curiosity and in no time after Tex Tolliver had wised me up a little I be-

came Tex and took the Red Hawk away from him and went after that Raider. All Tex said was "go to it. She's yours." I also became Billy Barrow and took care of that Riff because he looked a heluva lots like my boss.

Well it all went to show how real the stories sounded and then the thrifty little woman said "Only a dime? Well no one ever went wrong on a dime."

And then she's more than pleased because her "big man" is so much more pleasant after a dime's investment.

So that's why WE like **THRILLING ADVENTURES**.

The second prize winner is La Vern R. Zarr, 2020 Ainslie Street, Chicago, Ill. The letter from this enthusiastic reader follows:

A lone passenger, shivering, under the "L" station's protective roof. Gazing gloomily at a cold, rainy, November evening. Such as only Chicago can know.

Contemplating, whether to eat out before going to a show, or going to my room first, and then to a movie. It would finally be a movie. Something to pass the time away. Turning up my coat collar, I started on a mad run the remaining distance to my "four walls."

"Whoop!" I "slammed on the brakes," and skidded to a stop. To a man who still remembers "Beau Geste," and Romberg's "The Desert Song," besides having the records for my phonograph, that bugler of the Foreign Legion, loomed up out of a cigar store window, like gold quartz to a "sourdough." And Man! Two stories about the Legion. Something that hadn't happened in a blue moon.

From then on, my evening was a swift panorama of marching feet, machine guns, airplanes in the sky, and fabulous fortunes resting on tropical river bottoms. The redblooded courage of man making the supreme sacrifice. Intrigue, murder, vengeance, humor, pathos, and local color. All woven into a fabric far superior to any movie I ever saw. Authors—some new, some old favorites. Novels, serials, and short stories.

Coming events cast their shadows before. At last, a **THRILLING ADVENTURES** magazine is on the market. I'm impatiently waiting for the next issue—and the next—and next—and next.

Charles E. Jones, 1046 Mason Street, San Francisco, Cal., is third prize winner. His letter is brief and

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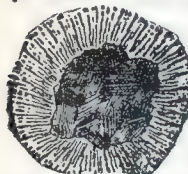
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Honorable mentions are awarded to the following readers:

R. L. Richardson, 908 Insurance Bldg., Seattle, Wash.; Louis C. Smith, 1908-98th Avenue, Oakland, Cal.; Leone O'Brien, 1109 Laguna St., San Francisco, Cal.; David J. Davies, South Hills, Pittsburg, Pa.; John H. Mackay, Jacksonville, Fla.; William Waterer, Clarkston, Wash.; James Cashin, Athens, Ga.; Jack Cox, Greenville, Tenn.; Rex Edison, Eugene, Ore.; Robert J. Hyatt, Schofield, Barracks, Hawaii; Mrs. Mae K. Ray, Waterloo, Ia.

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The list could be extended indefinitely, as the letters received were so uniformly interesting.

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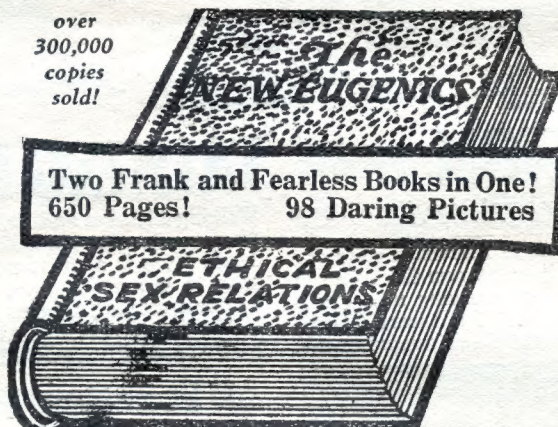
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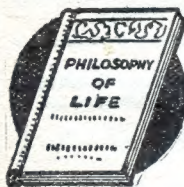
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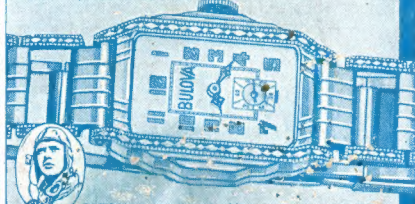
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